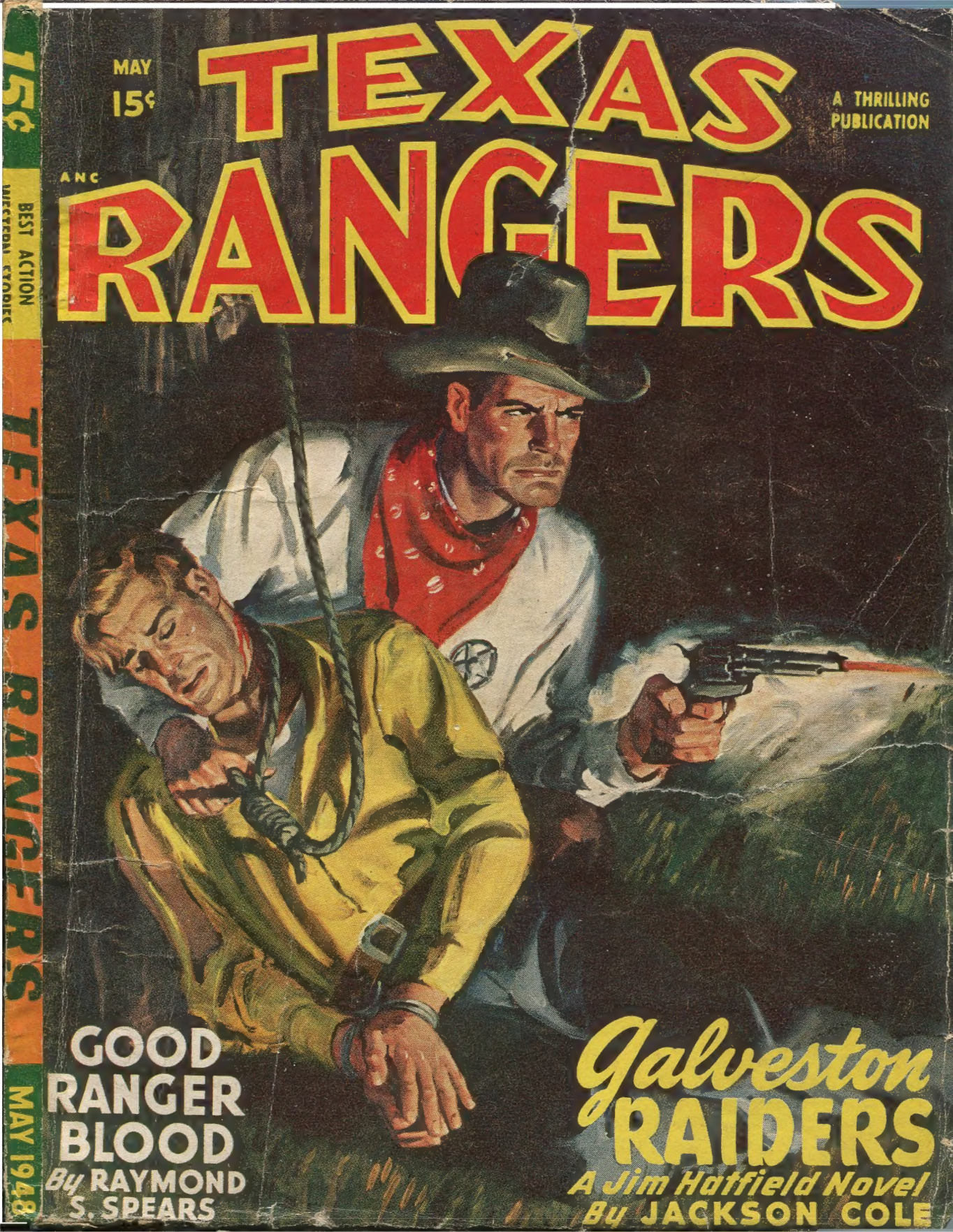
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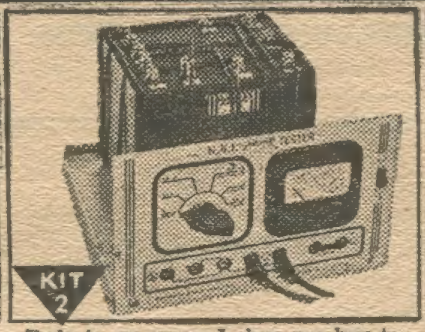

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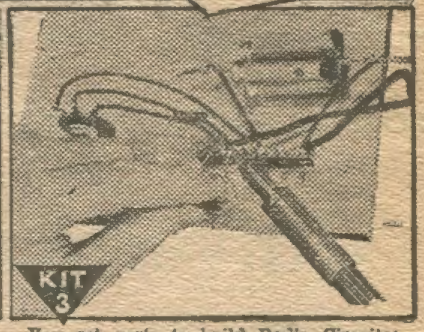

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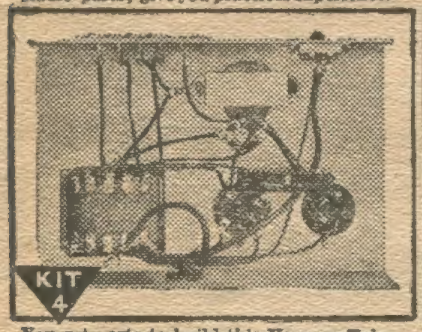

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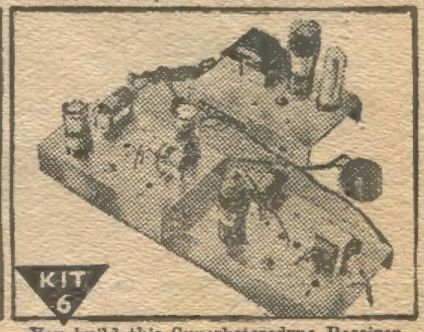

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When Sheriff MacLoyd's an author, the Doc contrives to bring a crook to book

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AND

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HIYA, gals and galluses! The present generation of young folks is no-account, I'm told. But I don't believe it. Every time I come onto some incident to the contrary, I feel real good about it.

There's a 14-year-old boy whose father runs a small lumber mill in Oregon. Owing to one thing and another, the mill has been running only part time lately, using only a part of the electric current it had contracted to pay for.

The boy went to his father and said: "Dad, is it all right if I use some of that power you're not using?"

"Sure," he said.

Short time afterward, having the time on his hands, the man decided to build a house. He had about everything he needed—except lath. He went to a lumberyard for it.

"Sorry," they told him, "but we haven't a stick of lathing. It sells faster'n we can buy it."

"Where d'you buy it?"

"From some red-eared kid that turns it out from the scrap pile in his old man's mill."

With a sheepish grin, Dad went home and made a deal with his 14-year-old.

Big Opportunities

"And do you know," he admitted later on, "that sprout of mine has been doing better making lath than I did with the mill!"

There's big opportunity in small things almost anywhere, things that small boys know about. Maybe some of you younger readers know where to find a heap of blue-green beetles, for instance.

What good are blue-green beetles? Well, right now they're saving the rangelands in 13 counties of northern California. A plant called Klamath weed, useless as forage, has taken a big hold on grazing land there, crowding out grass. Somebody found out that blue-green beetles eat nothing but Klamath weed. So something like a half-million blue-green beetles were rushed over from a laboratory in Australia.

Now stockmen want more beetles in a hurry. If you know how to catch or grow 'em, get in touch with the insect laboratory of the University of California at Berkeley. Being a beetle cowboy might turn into a mighty important job, especially these days when the whole world needs more beef.

A New National Park

I see where our latest National Park has been opened in the Florida Everglades. I haven't been in those parts for quite a spell, but I recollect that it's *muy* hot down there most of the year. That got me to wondering what the park rangers will wear.

Rules about uniforms are pretty strict in the National Park Service and ranger uniforms are made of heavy cord cloth, suited to a land of avalanches, not alligators.

Have you ever seen Rio Grande Valley in chili harvest time? I came onto an 800-acre field where 150 pickers were gathering 1400 dry tons of bright-red peppers. They made a glowing sight, brighter than many a famous blossom festival, as they hung in long, heavy strings, drying in the sun.

As everybody knows, in and out of Texas, chili is an important staple food among the Mexican population. The crop is important to growers, too. They told me that those 800 acres of peppers, more than a square mile of 'em, along with the milled products of chili powder, cayonne and paprika, would bring in $700,000.

What everybody doesn't know, in Texas and elsewhere, is that chili is a rich, nourishing food. Most folks think chili is hot stuff. Not when it's used proper, it isn't. It's spicy and flavorful. The good, mellow, nutritious part is the oily pulp inside the skin.

Chili, Mexican Style

So-called "chili" is a familiar item in beaneries all over United States. But not one place in fifty makes it right, Mexican style. The Mexicans soak the chilis in hot

(Continued on page 8)

THOUGHTS HAVE WINGS

You Can Influence Others With Your Thinking!

TRY IT SOME TIME. Concentrate intently upon another person seated in a room with you, without his noticing it. Observe him gradually become restless and finally turn and look in your direction. Simple—yet it is a *positive demonstration* that thought generates a mental energy which can be projected from your mind to the consciousness of another. Do you realize how much of your success and happiness in life depend upon your influencing others? Is it not important to you to have others understand your point of view—to be receptive to your proposals?

Demonstrable Facts

How many times have you wished there were some way you could impress another favorably—*get across to him or her your ideas?* That thoughts can be transmitted, received, and understood by others is now scientifically demonstrable. The tales of miraculous accomplishments of mind by the ancients are now known to be fact—not fable. The method whereby these things can be *intentionally*, not accidentally, accomplished has been a secret long cherished by the Rosicrucians—one of the schools of ancient wisdom existing throughout the world. To thousands everywhere, for centuries, the Rosicrucians have privately taught this nearly-lost art of the practical use of mind power.

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THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 6)

water, scrape out and use the pulp. The skin and seeds are the hot, rank part that are dried and ground and used in the chili joints. A genuine chili parlor would make a big hit anywhere by serving real chili con carne and chili frijoles.

If you're in the eats trade, or hanker to know for your own use how to make chili sauce that's excellent food, just ask me, folks. Fire along the usual stamped, self-addressed envelope if you want a red-hot sudden answer. All peppers, let me remind you, aren't chili. There are scores of varieties, from the big, green bell pepper, called mangoes back East, to small, hot kinds used sparingly for flavoring condiments and relishes.

Medicine Herbs

Getting back to the subject of big opportunities in small things—such as blue-green beetles—there's an enormous and growing demand for medicinal herbs. Bark, leaves, pollens and oils or essences of wild plants are bought by the big, national drug firms. Lots of folks make pretty fair incomes gathering these products. I'm not loaded down with detailed information on the subject, but wish I was.

I aim to find out more about it, though, and will tell you gals and galluses about it in later get-togethers. There are drug warehouses in a good many localities that advertise their wants and maybe your corner druggist can put you onto what they are, in case you're interested.

The latest development in this field is the discovery of a much-needed drug in a common Western plant called bay tree, which is really a shrub with shiny, green leaves.

In camp one night years ago I made a shakedown of bay leaves and woke up with

(Continued on page 106)

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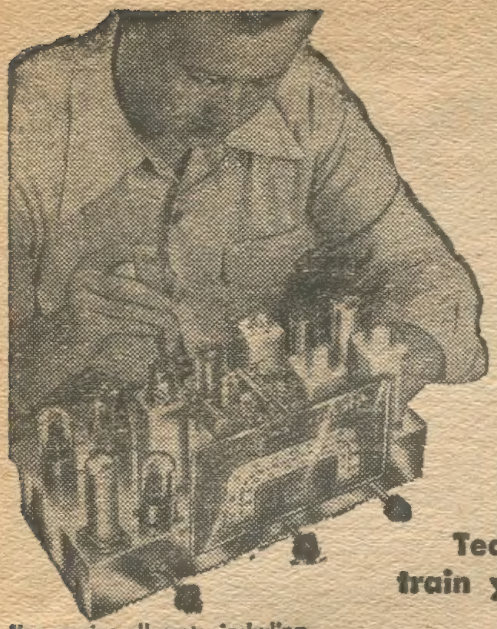

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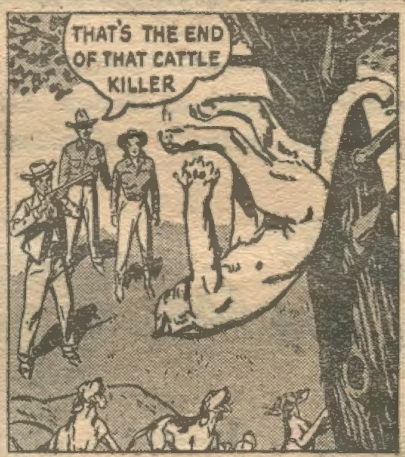

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GALVESTON RAIDERS

A JIM HATFIELD NOVEL BY **Jackson Cole**

An ambitious gun-boss aspires to take over a thriving city and strip the range of cattle, but he meets his match in the fighting Lone Wolf Ranger!

CHAPTER I: *Attack*

THE AFTERNOON sun tinted the mighty Gulf and bathed Galveston in a flood of gorgeous light. The tide was out and on the packed sand flats tiny crabs sidled across the gleaming expanse.

Tall-masted ships lying off the Texas port rose and fell with the restless swells, while in the placid bay hundreds of vessels, large and small, were anchored or

warped to piers. High-wheeled mule carts driven by Negroes in tattered clothing moved slowly in the shallows as they made trip after trip from shore to boat and back, helping to unload the cargoes.

The thriving city stood on a brave little island joined by a bridge to the mainland two miles away. Galveston had fought her way up from the surging ocean.

Back from the sandy sweep of magnificent beach and the thrusting fingers of wharves and warehouses dominating the waterfront, were avenues lined with comfortable homes in the exotic tropical setting. Less imposing homes sprawled farther along the island to the causeway and the bridges connecting the island with the mainland. It was this same causeway which long ago had been built by the notorious Jean Lafitte who, with his buccaneers and pirates, had used the island as their headquarters before they had finally been dispersed by the United States authorities back in Eighteen-twenty.

As evening fell now, enchantment cast a spell over Galveston. There was bustle on the Strand, as the main street of the town was called, and sailors were securing their vessels for the night. Yet this was all subdued, mellowed by the closing day. In the purpling shadows enfolding the town, Galveston was an island of peace.

But there was no peace in the waterfront office where four men were holding a heated discussion. Voices there were raised, and faces were darkened by anger.

The owner of the office, Archibald Vale, about whom the furore centered, paced the floor with the feline movements of a caged panther. He was a nervous man, with a thin body except for a growing paunch which he kept pulled in by a wide, silver-studded Mexican belt supporting his fawnskin trousers.

His silk shirt was purple, with a flowing collar, and a bright scarf adorned his pulsing throat. His black hair grew long, and he had brushed it back in waves meant to hide the sparseness on top, but with none too great success. Sweeping sideburns decorated his high cheek bones, and his flecked eyes were shadowed.

As Vale spoke impatiently, angrily, his white hands, too small for a man, gesticulated freely. His pale lips formed the words of harsh sentences which he flung out with imperial rage. He obviously considered himself a being superior to the men to whom he was speaking.

"How I loathe strife and argument!" he complained bitingly. "I am an artist, pure and simple, not a money grubber or a cattle chaser! I cannot be annoyed by bickering. You must accept my price, Wynant."

"It's much too low, in our opinion," firmly said one of the two men with whom he was arguing.

"'Opinion! which on crutches walks, and sounds the words another talks!'" Vale quoted, and the epigram pleased him, at least, as he paused to savor its aptitude.

MAJOR JACKSON WYNANT, the cattleman whom Vale was challenging, reddened at the implied insult, but with an effort held his irritation in check.

He was a big, heavy man, in the leather riding trousers and half boots, butternut shirt and red bandanna usually worn by men of the range. His Stetson hung by its chin strap from the back of his chair.

He had acquired his military title when he had been an officer in the Confederate forces during the Civil War, and it was there that he had also acquired a habit of leadership which had become characteristic. Friends and neighbors, recognizing this trait in Major Wynant, had gladly accepted his guidance, for his advice and help to his friends in whatever difficulty they might find themselves had become invaluable.

The Major's thick brown hair was streaked with gray, and the sun had burned his face and his big, strong hands a deep tan. His eyes were brown and clear and steady, and he kept them fixed on Archibald Vale. Clearly he resented the man's words and manner, was rightfully angered by Vale's caustic remarks and the rude way the man treated him and his companion as inferiors. But this was not evident when he spoke.

THE BALANCE ON THE SIDE OF JUSTICE!

"Fuller here and I," he said, "represent stock raisers who sell in Galveston. What's wrong with the buyers we've dealt with in the past, we don't know—except that they are no longer buying. It seems you're the only man in town who will take a herd, and there used to be a dozen. But we've decided not to sell to you, Vale. We'll hold our cattle, since the per head price you offer is less than it costs to raise a beef. It shouldn't be. The Cuban war's on, and

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meat fetches high prices down there. Other markets in places besides Galveston pay twice what you will. So you see our position. You must have known it, because I told all this to your man here, Teakettle Jones."

In a corner, at one side of Vale, stood the man called Jones. He was an unprepossessing specimen with a large head, shaggy black hair, and an unkempt beard. His nose hooked over his mouth which was as wide as that of a catfish, and his yellowed teeth were clenched on a corncob pipe. He had the torso of a big man, his great, hairy arms showing immense physical strength, but his legs were so short and bowed that he was no taller than a dwarf.

As attention focused on him for a moment, "Teakettle" Jones began to hiss, in an effort to speak, a nervous habit he exhibited when excited. His small eyes blinked as he let off steam.

"See, it's like I told yuh, Mr. Vale!" he managed to sputter. "They're stubborn as mules."

"Be quiet, Jones," ordered Vale. "A narrow mind begets obstinacy. Never forget that."

Abe Fuller, the cattleman who accompanied Wynant, did not have the Major's patience in accepting Vale's last innuendo. The grim set of the mouth of the tall, bony man with the wide shoulders, who wore riding clothes and Stetson, and carried a six-shooter in his cartridge belt, clearly expressed his opinion.

"I've stood enough of this, Vale!" he burst out. "Yuh've called us whatever yuh felt like for quite a spell now, and I won't take any more! We're free men and we stand up for our rights—fight for 'em, if we've got to. We can sell our cattle

wherever we please—or not sell 'em, if we don't feel like it. And you get no more of our beefs if we can help it!"

HIS blunt defiance stopped Vale short. The cattle buyer's flecked eyes blazed and the cords of his neck swelled.

"Very well," he said thickly. "I had Jones bring you here to me because I hoped you'd listen to reason. I see that I was mistaken. Good evening."

He turned and left the room.

Teakettle Jones was hissing violently. "Yuh shouldn't have made him mad, gents!" he cried. "Yuh don't know him like I do!"

Fuller shrugged. "Come on, Major," he said shortly. "Let's get some grub and look over the town before we start for home. Ought to get somethin' out of our long trip."

Wynant nodded as he rose, a weary droop to his shoulders.

"I hoped Vale would give us a better deal," he said. "So long, Teakettle."

Teakettle nodded, biting his pipe stem. He watched the cattlemen leave the Vale Company office with an ambiguous expression in his small, blinking eyes.

Out on the street, Major Wynant and Abe Fuller walked to the Strand, Galveston's main artery, and strolled along, taking in the sights. They were unfamiliar sights and of deep interest to men who, during most of the year, saw only cattle and the wide open spaces of Texas range. Ship chandlers, saloons, stores and other business structures lined both sides of the wide way. Here the sea was predominant, but from the land lying beyond the island was brought produce to fill the ships on their outbound trips. Sailing into the harbor, those same vessels brought cargoes of vital imports and sturdy immigrants to settle the wilderness.

Night had fallen when Wynant and Fuller had seen enough of the city and decided to begin their journey home. They picked up their horses at the corral where the mounts had been left, and rode west from the city across the long causeway bridging the two miles to the mainland. There was a moon, and the wind had a heavy, wet salt smell, while gentle harbor waves lapped below them. A few carts and horsemen were coming and going between the island and the shore.

"I don't cotton to that Vale hombre," growled Abe Fuller, when they had ridden a distance out onto the causeway. "He's outlaw, even if he is high-toned. He'd skin us alive, if we'd let him, and hang our pelts out on his office door to dry."

"I have a plan to outwit him, Abe," replied the Major. "One that ought to work out all right for us. Vale's tryin' to make too much profit, and wants to leave us holdin' the bag. But we won't do it. Galveston ain't the only port to ship from. Looks like he thinks he owns the town. Well—let him."

Fuller nodded, but he was plainly uneasy, had been ever since they had ridden out of town. Time and again he had looked back over his hunched shoulder, but had seen no one. Now, as he glanced back again, he saw the shadows of riders on the bridge, some little distance behind. Ahead loomed the eastern rim of Texas, but some ride yet before reaching the mainland.

"I got the creeps, Major," Fuller said. "Can't tell just why, unless it's because I reckon Vale let us off too easy."

"He couldn't do anything else," Wynant assured easily.

Fuller said nothing more, but he breathed more freely when they left the narrow bridge and took the lower fork of a Texas road. They expected to ride on in the moonlight until their horses tired, then sleep that night along the way. Their ranches stood miles back from the flat Gulf plains, and it would be too hard a run to try to reach home that night.

As they traveled on, on one hand glistened the waters of a bayou; on the other were rice and cotton fields. Shortly a stretch of dirt soggy from seepage slowed them, and Fuller glanced around quickly as he heard the *clop-clop* of hoofs. Neither man paid any attention to a planter's roomy shed used for storing bales as they approached it. But when they came abreast of this, guns suddenly flamed from inside the shed.

Abe Fuller caught the full charge of lead as bullets ripped into him and his tall mount. He was dead before he struck the ground.

Wynant had not been killed instantly, because the bodies of Fuller and of the rancher's horse had screened him. But he knew he had been hit when he felt

Rising from the sugar cane in the cart, Hatfield's steel fingers fastened around Riley's scrawny throat (CHAP. XVII)

something burn his left arm above the elbow. His mustang screeched and reared, whirling violently and bolting into the bayou, where he sank in the mud.

"Get the other cuss, boys," a laconic voice ordered from the shelter of the shed.

Menacing figures, with masked faces, rushed from the shed to obey, shooting as they came. But for the moment they could find no target. Wynant had hastily slid from his horse into the water. Temporarily the Major was below the level of the fire of his enemies.

But his position was desperate. Unless help came, miraculousy, this was the end.

CHAPTER II

Rescue

HELP for which Major Wynant did not even dare hope was near at hand, and unexpectedly approaching. "Betcha" Steve Pittman, footloose young Texas cowboy who had been spending a couple of days at the lively seaport of Galveston, had decided to ride on. He had left the town behind and was nearing the mainland end of the causeway, with his pack rolled on the saddle behind him, a carbine under his leg, and two six-shooters in his holsters, when he heard a commotion ahead.

He saw the blazing of guns from a small building on the right of the road ahead, and heard a man's voice calling from the bayou.

"This way, Texas! Honest men, this way!" There was a frantic note in the strong voice calling on anyone within hearing to offer assistance.

"I'm comin'," Betcha yelled back. As he drew a Colt and cocked it he saw men in the road shooting toward the bayou shore. A horse surged from the mud of the bayou and went galloping by.

"Hold up there!" roared Betcha. "What goes on?"

A bullet zinged close to his head. Other men along the highway—they were masked, he saw—swung on him and their guns flamed. He opened up in reply, blasting them as fast as he could pull trigger. His slugs ricocheted and shrieked among them. One gunslinger let out a whoop and danced to the shed, stung by Betcha's lead until all fight was gone from him.

Pittman kept shifting his mount. Cutting off the road he galloped around the shed to take his enemies in the rear. There a dozen saddled horses stood waiting, held by a member of the band. Betcha dusted the horse-holder and sent a couple over the animals, stampeding them. They tore loose from the howling holder and bolted in every direction.

It was an exciting fight and Betcha was enjoying it. But it began to grow too one-sided when the crew on the road turned their full attention on him, as he annoyed them. He slipped his empty pistol into its sheath and brought out his spare weapon. But one masked man after another dashed at him. Betcha yanked his rein as the fighting became too hot and rapidly retreated, his mount eagerly picking up speed.

He had ridden only a short distance when he caught sight of a man running along before him, headed toward Galveston. Betcha lifted a six-gun.

"Don't shoot!" the fleeing man panted breathlessly. "I'm the one yuh saved back there at the bayou! I'm all in. . . . Give me a lift!"

Betcha had had but a glimpse of the fellow who had been lying on the bayou shore, fighting the masked bunch from the shed, but he recognized him now.

"Up behind, pronto!" ordered Betcha.

He offered a hand but the man sprang to the back of Pittman's black horse, and they were on their way toward Galveston. The lights of the city glowing in the sky beckoned them to safety. Futile bullets from the enraged, dismounted crew whose horses had been scattered followed them, but the black horse which Betcha Pittman had so fittingly called "Stormcloud" quickly brought them out of danger.

They stopped at the first lighted house on the road. A planter who lived there welcomed them as the man whom Betcha had rescued identified himself.

"I'm Major Wynant, suh. A rancher friend of mine named Abe Fuller and I were set on by outlaws a short time ago. Fuller is done for. This generous young man here snatched me from death. I don't know his name, but once I learn it I'll never forget it."

"My handle is Steve Pittman," the cowboy said, grinning, "though I'm usually called Betcha. . . . What were they after yuh for, Major?"

"I'm not certain. I can only guess. I'll tell yuh all I know as soon as possible."

The planter took them inside. In the lamplight Betcha saw that Wynant was a heavy man of good size, and around fifty. His stamp was that of the cowman, though now his clothing was damp and plastered with black bayou mud. Blood stained his upper arm where a bullet had slashed the flesh.

"I'll keep watch outside in case they catch their horses and come after us," suggested Betcha, as he saw the bleeding arm. And to the planter he said, "You better fix up his wound, mister."

BUT the attackers had not followed, and in a short time it became certain that they would not. Major Wynant was suffering from shock, and needed rest. Betcha further suggested that the rancher get the rest, while he, himself, rode up the highway to check up.

As he was preparing to leave the planter's house, he saw both Wynant and the planter looking at him, sizing him up with obvious curiosity, and he smiled broadly. He had expected that, was used to it.

Betcha Pittman was a blond Texas giant, a cowboy and an expert rider. He wore leather, but his new blue shirt, fancy speckled bandanna and sixty-dollar hat of the best quality bore witness to his patronage of the Galveston stores. He was proud of his heritage, and proud of his powerful black gelding, Stormcloud, a horse with the nerve and stamina of his rider, and ever as ready for adventure.

Whatever that might turn out to be, however, Betcha rarely grew excited himself, no matter what the danger.

His smiling bronzed face was welcome at any cowcamp or ranch where he happened to stop, and there was always a riding job for a man like Betcha. His nickname came from his instant readiness to bet whatever he had on any turn of chance, and this habitual expression had been picked up by his friends and acquaintances and pinned on him. He had wide-set blue eyes, a generous mouth, and the strength of two ordinary men. And, scattered through Texas, were many men who would be eager to testify that Betcha Steve Pittman was a man to ride the river with.

When Betcha reached the scene of the fight, near the bayou, the shed was deserted, the gunslingers gone. Abe Fuller lay with his legs under the stiffening body of his mustang and it took all Betcha's great strength to extricate the body. He laid Fuller out in the shed and covered the remains with a blanket he took from the rancher's pack.

He had sighted a saddled horse grazing by the road as he had been busy with the rancher's body, and believed the horse to be Wynant's mount. He roped the horse and led him to the planter's where Wynant claimed him. There Betcha and Wynant spent the night, with no further trouble.

Wynant felt much better in the morning. Arrangements for Fuller's burial were made at once, and before noon Betcha and the Major started west from the Gulf plains.

"I'll mosey along for a few miles with yuh," offered Betcha. "Wasn't goin' nowhere special, anyhow."

"I'll be glad to have yuh," the rancher said heartily. "But why not make it all the way and take a job with me? Are yuh tied up anywheres else?"

"No." Betcha shook his head. "But I didn't aim to go to ridin' for a while yet. Sort of figgered I'd earned a little lay-off, to see things."

They kept a sharp eye peeled for another ambush, but saw no further sign of attackers as the day wore on.

The Major gave Betcha the whole story of what had happened before the attack.

"And I think Vale has driven out other Galveston cattle buyers by intimidation and force," he said firmly, when he had finished telling his own experience. "I talked with old Jake Silver, who used to buy my cows. He seemed afraid to say much but he did show me a copy of the paper which told about a couple of cattle dealers who was found floatin' in the harbor one mornin'. Vale has a fleet of schooners off Galveston, waitin' to be loaded. It's only three days to Cuba and meat sells there for a fortune. He wanted us to sell cheap but we refused—and what happened to us at the bayou may have been his answer."

"Yeah, I betcha it was this Vale hombre hit yuh last night!" agreed the cowboy.

"I have a hunch it was his agents all right," said Wynant, "but I couldn't swear to anyone. Could you? All them men was masked. But I do aim to wire a complaint to the Texas Rangers at Austin. This business shore needs lookin' into."

Betcha nodded. "A good idea. They're mighty salty, them Rangers."

An hour later the road skirted a railroad track, one of the lines converging on Houston, and soon the riders came to a way station. There a telegraph operator accepted Wynant's wire to Austin, informing the Rangers of the killing and assault by masked men just outside of Galveston, and asking for aid.

JOGGING hurt the Major's wound, which Betcha could tell, although Wynant made no complaint. Because of that, the cowboy decided to run through to the Double U, Wynant's place, to make sure the rancher reached home safely. Betcha had no intention of remaining at the Double U, though at the moment he was footloose and fancy free. As he had earlier told Major Wynant, he wanted to roam for a while before settling down to another riding job.

Once the plains were left behind, the country rose slowly. Cattle grazed in green pastures, and smoke rose from ranchhouse chimneys and from other spots where campfires had been built. They were still some distance from the Double U and taking it easy to favor Wynant's wounded arm. That night Wynant and Betcha slept in a patch of woods off the highway.

In the morning, after a quick snack and hot coffee which Betcha made over a small breakfast fire, they resumed their journey inland. They still rode easily, and the sun had passed the zenith and was dropping in the sky when they turned onto a side road following the shallow valley of a small river. This led to a settlement.

"My home town," Wynant said proudly, as they approached.

"What's her handle?" inquired Betcha.

He had seen many such places and they all looked more or less alike to him. This one had the usual plaza, sun awnings over the walks, a main street and a few branching lanes. There were also the usual saloons, general stores, livery stable and other businesses caring for the needs of range folks.

"This here is Terryville," Wynant told Betcha. "See that feller asleep in the shade of the jail? That's Marshal Lear."

Betcha grinned his infectious grin as he remarked something about the poor lawman being overworked, and the Major laughed with him. Wynant waved to a couple of friends as he and Betcha rode through the town.

Beyond Terryville, they hit a rough road west along the stream. Soon Wynant indicated cattle grazing in the bottoms.

"My cows," he said. And when, a few moments later, he sighted his ranchhouse, he let out a whoop of relief and delight. "Here we are, Betcha!"

"Fine!" said Betcha, still not impressed, though he realized what the place must mean to the Major.

The ranchhouse was of pine, with a porch running around three sides. There was a stable, a hay barn, and a low shack which could be used as a bunkhouse. In a fenced area at the rear were about a hundred cows.

"Say, those beefs look mighty fat," Betcha said admiringly.

"They should be." Wynant chuckled. "I feed 'em corn meal mash and cornstalk silage. They'll fetch fancy prices. I have a couple thousand critters runnin' loose as well. Lew Clifford, one of my neighbors, has a bigger ranch, the LC. We have mighty fine cattle hereabouts because we have an association with other spreads and range together. Fuller was one of us."

The loss of his friend had greatly saddened Wynant. He was feeling his grief more deeply now, since he was faced with the duty of informing Fuller's family of his death.

CHAPTER III

A Texas Ranch—and a Girl

THE Double U, Betcha quickly discovered, was a small outfit compared to those on which he had worked farther west. But there was no need for him to remain long in a place so tame. He made

a mental note to leave the next day.

It was close to sundown and there were several cowboys in the yard who had already ridden in from their work on the range. They greeted the Major and offered cheerful nods to the guest. As Betcha dismounted to take care of Stormcloud, he took notice of the blue and yellow flowers by the stoop and the white curtains at the windows. They indicated the hand of a home-loving woman.

A slender girl of nineteen or twenty in a fresh white dress and with her raven-black hair caught up by a wide ribbon ran from the open door across the yard. She threw herself into the Major's arms, holding him tightly. She had a brilliant smile, a creamy complexion, and the roses in her cheeks vied with Nature's own. Her eyes were deep violet.

Her beauty and vitality bowled Betcha over. The instant he saw her his opinion of the Double U underwent a radical change. The spot, he decided, was the most interesting he had ever encountered.

"Uncle Jack!" the girl cried to the Major. "Oh, I'm so glad you're back!"

"So am I, dear," he told her, "and through plain luck I'm all right. But poor Abe is dead." Briefly and hastily he told her what had occurred. He waved toward the cowboy who had ridden in with him. "And here is the man who saved my life—Steve Pittman. Betcha, they call him usually, he says . . . Betcha, this is my niece, Mimi. She's my brother's daughter. He was killed at Shiloh."

Betcha's huge hand encompassed Mimi's small one for a moment, and in that instant his capitulation was complete.

When Betcha had seen to Stormcloud and washed up, he joined the Major in the living room. They had a drink and had smoked a cigarette apiece when Mimi called them into the dining room to eat. The boys trooped in and Mimi, wearing a crisp, fresh apron, served them. The food was delicious, and Betcha ate with the appetite of healthy youth.

After supper there were many things to claim Major Wynant's attention. He sent men out with messages to his friends, but rode off to the Fuller ranch himself. Betcha stayed behind at the Double U. His offer to help with the dishes pleased Mimi, and he dried them while they talked together. Betcha was floating on air in the

Hatfield felt the clip of lead as he went down on one knee and took careful aim at Vale (CHAP. XIX)

pretty girl's company.

He learned much in that short time they were together. For one thing he learned that Mimi's mother had been a famous French beauty from New Orleans. Mimi brought out a small painting to show Betcha, and it was plain to him that the artist had captured the loveliness of the woman. And the daughter had inherited her mother's beauty.

The mother had died shortly after Mimi's birth and the girl's father, a Confederate officer, had been slain in battle. In the dread war years Major Wynant's own wife also had died—of typhoid—and after the Major's return from the battlefields he had taken the orphaned daughter of his brother to rear as if she were his own.

Mimi was curious to know about Betcha, but it seemed to him that there was little of interest he could tell her. All he knew was that he had left home at the age of fourteen, and had been a cowboy ever since.

Finally everything—pots, pans and dishes, floor and tables—were polished and clean to Mimi's satisfaction, no easy task since it was plain that she was an excellent housekeeper. Then they left the kitchen and sat together in the front room while Mimi busied herself with some sewing.

She was making a new dress, she said. She always made her own clothes.

She loved to sew, but she loved a lot of things. She loved her Uncle Jack, and she adored flowers. She called Betcha's attention to those she was growing in boxes in the windows, and to others in vases and pitchers about the room. Betcha admired them extravagantly.

It was a pleasant evening, so delightful that when the Major renewed his offer of a job the next morning, Betacha accepted with alacrity. He liked the Major, but it was Mimi who was the magnet to make him stay and give up his roaming.

Major Wynant was full of plans to circumvent Archibald Vale, and anxious to put them into effect without delay.

"If Clifford and the others agree," he told Betcha, "we'll collect a big herd and drive to New Orleans. We'll get good prices there and fool Vale—and come out on top ourselves, in spite of the long drive."

THAT evening, half a dozen ranchers collected at the Double U. Lew Clifford, of whom Wynant had already spoken to Betcha was there, a ponderous, heavy man of sixty, with a gray beard and mustache. Another rancher, Dave Russell, who owned the Arrow up the river, was a Confederate veteran, like Wynant. So was George Olliphant, a small man who wore a wooden leg as proof of his heroism in war. Olliphant's Circle O was across the stream from the LC.

Ken Ells was another who had been in the war. He had married after his return from the fighting, and now owned a small spread and had a growing family. His brother-in-law, Rube Jeffers, owned a section next the Square E, the Ells outfit.

Betcha was introduced to them all, and they were regaled by Major Wynant with a stirring story of the Galveston run and the bayou fight, with occasional comments from the cowboy who had participated, when he was directly asked. But Betcha was more interested in Mimi than he was in business or in history, and when later Mimi agreed to take a stroll along the river path with him, he was delighted.

The moon was up and the night mild. There was a sweetness in the air of wild flowers and growing plants, and the stream murmured softly in its channel. The world was a wonderful place, thought Betcha Pittman. But such delights had to come to an end, as he regretfully admitted when Mimi decided it was time to go in.

Betcha worked through the following day with the Double U men, learning the ropes and the way things were done on the Wynant outfit. Expert with cattle and horses as he was, though, it was not long until he was one of the boys.

That evening, after supper, Wynant called him into the living room. The rancher had quickly come to rely on the young cowboy.

"We decided last night to collect our marketable beefs at Clifford's big corrals," the Major explained. "We'll finish brandin' and earmarkin' and make ready for the New Orleans run. The boys and I will move my cows in the mornin' and Mimi will ride over to join the other women. They aim to cook for us and curry us while we're at Clifford's. I need a man to stick here and yuh're it. Probably be two or three days. . . ."

After dark that night Betcha sat on the porch with his booted feet on the rail. Behind him in the front room burned a single oil lamp, silhouetting him against the open door. He was smoking and the slowly drifting vapor seemed to conjure up visions of Mimi.

The moon was silver and a faint breeze stirred the leaves. Betcha's keen ears caught several faint sounds but he was not alarmed. There were animals around, both wild and tame, and he did not scare easily anyway. Besides, what was there to fear in this scene of peace?

"Time to turn in, I reckon," thought Betcha.

And it was only a breath later that he was hit from behind. A wiry arm circled his throat, and since he was leaning back with his feet up on the rail, he fell over backward. More men rushed in on him, and though caught at a disadvantage, Betcha fought them. His great strength would have been a match for two or three men, but one after another jumped into the scuffle.

Knees rammed into Betcha's body and stinging punches landed on his face. He managed for a moment to break the strangle-hold one man had on him and draw in a breath of air, but as his arms and legs were secured by sheer weight of numbers, the strangle-hold clamped down again. After a time Betcha had to quit struggling.

"We got him, Teakettle," reported one of Betcha's foes. "But there ain't any sign of the others here."

A strange figure came up on the porch, a shaggy, bearded little man with bowed legs. In hissing words he gave his orders.

"Look around, look around!" He glared at Betcha. "Cowboy, where's Major Wynant?"

Betcha's head was clearing a bit. The grip on his throat had been relaxed, but now his hands were fastened behind him, and a couple of his attackers were sitting on his legs. Teakettle repeated his demand about Wynant.

"I don't savvy where the Major went," growled Betcha.

"Yuh're lyin'," rumbled Teakettle. "Before I'm through with yuh, yuh'll be whinin' to tell."

"I'll betcha I won't," the cowboy said defiantly.

DWARFISH Teakettle, hissing violently, made a flying start and landed on Betcha with both feet. He jumped up and down on the young fellow's prostrate body, grinding in his boot heels, until he was out of breath.

There were more than a dozen men with Teakettle, and they seized the Double U, breaking out Wynant's whisky and food. Teakettle threw out sentinels to watch for the approach of Wynant or any of his outfit. He could not understand why this one cowboy should be on the ranch alone. He kept trying to learn where the Major had gone, and why.

Teakettle's heavily armed men were in range leather and other cowboy fittings, though they were plainly toughs and gunmen. However, to Betcha, they did not seem to be the same bunch which had attacked Wynant and Fuller near Galveston. But Betcha, stoically accepting the abuse heaped on him, would have wagered his last dollar that they had something in common. Archibald Vale had been responsible for that Galveston attack, and Vale, Wynant's foe, had sent these men against the ranch.

They would get nothing out of Betcha. He would die before he would think of betraying his friend and employer.

CHAPTER IV

The Call

CAPTAIN William McDowell was Chief of the Texas Rangers, with headquarters in Austin. Eye to eye and gun muzzle to gun muzzle no outlaw for many years had disputed his authority, or would have done so now, but Time, his one inexorable enemy, long decades of service, had brought the aged officer to terms.

These terms were that he more or less sit at a desk instead of exploding off in all directions on the trail of lawbreakers who disturbed the peace of the Lone Star empire. Stiffened joints and muscles had become invisible but unbreakable chains which kept him down.

It has been said that wrath is the last emotion a man discards in growing old,

and this certainly held true with McDowell. In these days he could become even more supercharged about wrongdoing than had been the case in his youth when he had been able to let off some steam in action. That his wrath was again in the forefront of his mind was evidently the situation now as he sat in his office, simmering over some matter which had aroused his ire.

"I ain't licked yet!" he growled, shaking his fist, as if in Fate's leering features. "There's more than one way to skin a wildcat. And I'm shore goin' to collect a pelt!"

He heard a soft tread outside his office door and, as it opened, he swung to greet the tall man who entered.

Although McDowell was responsible for the enforcement of law in an area in Texas larger than most Eastern states, he had only a handful of agents and assistants. But they were trained and capable, and through their strong young arms the Captain managed to fend off Nature's plan to retire him to a rocking chair on the porch.

Such a man was the tall officer who now stood before him.

"Hatfield!" he exclaimed. "You're always on time."

The very sight of Jim Hatfield was soothing to him, as it long since had come to be to anyone in trouble. The Ranger was the epitome of physical capability. Over six feet tall, he had the broad shoulders and narrow hips of a fighting man in perfect trim. His black hair glinted with health, and his gray-green eyes were clear, alert. A wide, mobile mouth which could smile easily or grow grim with determination softened the ruggedness of his features.

He wore no uniform to indicate his calling. Instead, his garb consisted of clean riding breeches, a new blue shirt, shined boots with silver spurs, and a bandanna reversed at his throat. A big Stetson with a curved brim was slanted on his head, the chin strap loose in its runner. Two heavy six-shooters were in his holsters, the leather oiled and worked so it would offer no snaggling resistance when a Colt was pulled, for Hatfield's speed on the draw was blinding, a fact of which McDowell was well aware.

A bronzed giant with deep-rooted humanitarian impulses, Jim Hatfield drew out the best in those with whom he came in contact. Decent people instinctively trusted and depended on him. With like instinct, those beyond the law feared and avoided him. And beyond his unquestioned fighting abilities, Hatfield had a field general's brain. His knowledge of strategy and tactics, and how to make use of them, had made him McDowell's greatest Ranger.

McDowell had sent for Hatfield, and had the evidence in the present case which infuriated him ready on his desk. He thrust a telegram and some other papers, containing complaints to the Rangers, at Hatfield.

"Major Jackson Wynant was a fine soldier, Jim," he said in his abrupt way, as Hatfield scanned the telegram. "He's got this Double U spread now. Abe Fuller, who was killed near Galveston, as the Major's wire says, was another Confederate veteran. But Wynant's telegram ain't the only word I've had about trouble at Galveston. There had been reports of cattle dealers beaten and thrown into the bay, and no sign of who done it. I savvy one of 'em down there—old Jake Silver. Yuh might hunt him up and see what he can tell yuh about the ructions. Sounds to me like a strong, dangerous band is operatin' from Galveston and piercin' right into the ranch country."

"Yes, suh—I'm ready," Hatfield said. His voice was deceptively soft. In repose, as he was now, his manner was relaxed and easy. "I'll drop in on Major Wynant at the Double U on my way to the coast."

"*Bueno.*" McDowell sounded relieved. "With a hoss like Goldy yuh can reach the Double U by dark tomorrer. Yuh can take a breather there, then move over to Galveston."

Arrangements completed, Hatfield went outside.

McDOWELL left his desk and went to the window, where he stood watching his best Ranger mount his golden sorrel, Goldy. The sorrel, the Captain knew, had stamina and speed to carry Hatfield on his missions, enjoying them as much as the man did. Ranger and horse were happiest when on the trail, fighting against odds, living off the land.

Hatfield's carbine rode in a sling, a slim pack was rolled in a poncho at the

cantle, and his saddle-bags held iron rations. With a few items such as spare ammunition, field-glasses, a canteen and a clean shirt, the Ranger could travel surprising distances in record time, and still without discomfort.

Goldy's long tail lashed, and he danced a bit as Hatfield settled in the leather seat and waved a hand to McDowell.

"Wish I could go along," muttered the Captain at the window, as his star officer hit the trail for Galveston.

With a regretful sigh for days that were gone, Captain McDowell trudged back to his desk and lowered himself into his swivel chair. . . .

Jim Hatfield made as rapid a trip from Austin as he always accomplished when mounted on Goldy. Twenty-four hours later, when night was drawing on, he rode into Terryville. There he made a short pause at the Last Chance, the settlement's largest saloon. Food and drink refreshed him, and the bartender told him exactly how to reach the Double U on the bank of the river. Terryville was off the main highway to the Gulf, but by making use of intervening ravines, Hatfield had first arrived at the gap where the small town nestled.

It was nearly ten o'clock when Hatfield rode toward the Double U, a time when usually the weary workers of the range would have retired after the long day's exertions. But Hatfield believed his mission brooked no delay.

The moon was up, casting a silvery glow over the red dirt of the narrow road. Off to Hatfield's right, through a screen of brush and patches of woods, ran the stream.

The sorrel moving easily under him, Hatfield sighted a light around a sharp bend.

"We'll be at the Double U in a few shakes, Goldy," he murmured.

The shift of direction brought the wind full in his face. It brought the sound of voices, and other noises he heard caused him to slow the gelding. Finally he stopped, sitting his saddle and staring across the wide stretch of range between the ranch and himself.

"Sounds like too much hard cider at a barn dance," he muttered. "Only I don't hear any music."

Hatfield never made a move without taking proper precautions. He was never off guard and he was not now. He did not like the sounds from Wynant's spread, and he always heeded small signs. He left the road and went slowly along the cowpath by the river. It was a devious way, but he was hidden by the dark growth and could approach unseen.

As he drew close to the lighted house he dismounted and dropped his reins.

"Wait here," he told Goldy. "I don't cotton to the smell of this."

On foot he stealthily neared the ranchhouse. He could see a dozen or more men in the side yard. They were laughing and joking, and some were certainly drunk. They were up to something questionable, and were enjoying themselves.

Hatfield crouched at the side of a brush clump and studied the scene. Light came from the ranchhouse windows and a couple of lanterns were on the ground near the tree around which the men were clustered.

The group on Hatfield's side parted for a moment and he saw a big man in cow-

[*Turn page*]

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boy clothing, hands tied behind him, and a noose around his neck. The rope had been thrown over a limb. A couple of the crew would pull and lift the cowboy clear of the ground ever so often. His legs were not bound and his frantic kickings as he fought for breath and life were what so amused his tormentors.

Hatfield knew instantly that he must do something about the situation. Swiftly he studied the terrain. The rear of the house was in shadow, and there were smaller buildings he might use for protection in getting around to a vantage point.

The men watching the victim dancing on air had a hard look. No one was a better judge of this than the Ranger who knew that he had come upon something decidedly wrong at the Double U.

"That hombre is too young to be Major Wynant," he thought, as he silently slid off and began to make his way to the back of the ranchhouse. He sighted the glow of a cigarette as a man stationed up on the road drew on his smoke. These men had at least one sentry out. Perhaps more were on the highway, covering the approaches to the house.

OVER a dozen saddled horses were tethered to the rails of the corral fence. These mounts, all ready to go at a moment's notice, must belong to the celebrants. Hatfield cautiously approached the horses. With the long knife he wore it took but a few moments work beside each mustang for him to insure the success of his future operations. He led one of the animals to the rear of the corral and left it there, before he started around the far side of the ranchhouse.

There he found a vantage point from which he was able to hear what was being said by the men in the yard. Shadows shielded him and the porch hid him as he squatted there, listening.

"Where's Wynant?" a man's voice ordered. "Talk, cowboy! We'll string yuh up in earnest if yuh don't." A sound that distinctly was hissing followed the words.

From his position the Ranger could see the man who had spoken—a short, bearded man with legs bowed like a wedding ring. He had a big head with shaggy black hair and he gripped a corncob pipe in his wide mouth. While his upper body was that of a big man, his legs made him a dwarf. He kept letting off steam, hissing past the stem of his pipe. He seemed to be in charge.

Hatfield studied the others. Some were tall, others medium or short, thin, or stout, but all were dirty and unshaven and heavily armed. The bottles from which they had been drinking were waved in the lantern light.

"Hold him up again!" called one of the men. "Let him dance, Teakettle."

"He'll tell me where Wynant is or I'll kill him inch by inch!" shouted the man called Teakettle. He was the dwarfish ringleader.

The Ranger's conclusion was easily reached. Enemies had seized the Double U, in Major Wynant's absence. The big cowboy the outlaws were tormenting must be one of Wynant's crew.

Hatfield drew back and peered in a side window. A lamp was burning on a center table in the living room, which showed signs of recent rowdy occupancy. Food had been thrown on the floor, the rugs kicked up and mud tracked in. Chairs had been overturned and dirty glasses and empty bottles stood around. Someone had been amusing himself by shooting holes in paintings hung on the walls.

The living room was empty now, and Hatfield went through the window and blew out the lamp. He sprang to the other side of the room and, drawing a Colt, crouched ready at another window.

"Hey, the lamp went out!" yelled someone outside. noticing the sudden darkness of the house.

"Don't get excited," growled Teakettle. "It run out of oil, that's all. . . . Pasty, go fill her up again."

Hatfield took careful aim and hit the nearer of the two lanterns outside. It smashed, the light went out, and an instant later the other lantern crashed as a bullet drove into it. But the flaming pistols had been spotted. "Somebody's in the house!" roared Teakettle. "At 'em, boys."

Hatfield was already running for the open side door leading into the yard. Blasting guns spoke as Teakettle and his men concentrated on the point where they had seen the flashes. Bullets plugged into the wooden walls and shrieked through the room he had left. Then in a rush, Teakettle led his fighters for the front door. They yelled and kept shooting as they came on.

The big tree where they had been working on the cowboy threw dense shadows. Hatfield was dashing for the spot where Teakettle and his men had left their victim as they crowded into the house.

The big cowboy lay on the warm earth, panting. The Ranger stooped and loosened the noose, whipped it from over the victim's head.

"Can yuh walk?" he asked quickly.

"I'll betcha I can," gasped the big fellow.

The Ranger cut the cowboy's wrists free. Seizing him under the arms, he pulled him erect. He was Hatfield's height even without his boots and hat. He was groggy and in a bad way but as he realized help had come he fought for a last reserve of strength.

Teakettle and most of his men were hunting through the house, raising an unholy racket. The sentry stationed toward the road set up a howl of warning.

"Hey, Teakettle! There goes yore cowboy!" He had seen Hatfield and the puncher silhouetted in the moonlight in the yard.

A hasty slug whined over the Ranger and the man he hoped to save. And Hatfield realized that if the waddy could not travel under his own power there was little chance of escape.

CHAPTER V

Night Fight

FINALLY Teakettle heard the sentry's warning. The lamp in the living room had been relighted to aid the outlaws in their hunt for whoever had gunned them. This was a help to Hatfield as he fought to get the Double U cowboy away before he should be recaptured.

The dwarf leader, hissing like a violently boiling kettle, waddled out onto the porch.

"What's wrong, Digger?" he yelled to the guard.

"Look down the yard," shouted "Digger," running in from the ranch. "There they go!" He fired again.

Teakettle's legs were like the two halves of a wagon wheel rim but he could move with astonishing speed. He jumped the low rail and landed running, tearing around to the side of the house.

The big cowboy was being pulled along by the Ranger. He grunted with pain at every step.

"I can hardly walk!" he said.

"Walkin' ain't good enough!" the tall officer told him grimly. "If yuh don't want to be strung up for keeps, or look like a sieve, we got to run!"

Gripping the groggy waddy's wrist Hatfield made a dash for the corral. But he realized the big fellow had to help himself. He could not drag or carry such a heavy burden and stand a chance of eluding the enemy.

Teakettle was bellowing orders to his gunhands to cut off the fugitives, as the bandy-legged man himself fired again and again. More lead buzzed in the night air but the torturers of the cowboy had drunk up all the liquor at the ranch and their aim was none too good as they tried for the shadowy figures dodging between the small buildings.

Shrill whistles came from the Ranger's lips as he hurried on. And by the time Hatfield had brought the panting cowboy to the saddled mustang he had picked from among the horses at the corral, Goldy had trotted to him in answer to the whistling. With a sigh of relief the Ranger boosted the waddy to the leather seat on the black gelding he had chosen as a getaway mount.

"Hold on!" he warned, as the big man sagged.

He sprang to Goldy's saddle, gripping the rein of the black. Teakettle and several of his gunmen aides, furious now, were halfway to the corral, firing as they came and ordering the fugitives to halt. Hatfield touched Goldy and picked up speed around the lower end of the pens, skirting the line of brush along the river.

"There they are!" screamed Teakettle. "Hosses, boys! Catch 'em! Don't let 'em get away!"

The dwarfish outlaw leader and his men leaped to their startled mustangs. Strong legs clinched on leather and spurs drove deep as the riders whirled their mounts. Hatfield glanced back as he cut up the bank of the stream, to see the riders hurled from their horses, one after another. Some clutched saddle-horns but it did them no good for the Ranger had taken

the precaution of cutting through the cinches when he had made his preparations for this moment of fiasco. All of the men, including Teakettle, sprawled in the dirt. It was a mêlée of dust and confusion and swearing.

The utter demoralization of the outlaw band for the moment gave Hatfield the minutes he needed to shake off pursuit in the night. As he followed the river past the next bend he heard the sound of the water rushing through rocky shallows. Breaking through the bank he started across, and he and the cowboy clinging to the saddle of the black reached the other side with only wet boots.

The big waddy was trying to tell him something, but was unintelligible. Hatfield sensed what it was. Dismounting, he scooped up cool water in his big hat crown.

"Yuh need a drink? Here."

The fellow drank in great gulps. His throat was like flannel and he seemed unable to take in enough. He had water all over his face and his torn shirt front was soaked before he paused.

"Ugh," he said huskily. "Feel better. Ain't had a drink since them sidewinders come to the ranch."

"What's yore handle?" asked Hatfield hurriedly. He was watching the distant light through the trees, which marked the Double U, and knew he must not delay long.

"Betcha Steve Pittman. Just come to work for Major Wynant at his ranch." He reached out and gripped Hatfield's arm. "Listen! We got to warn Wynant! They're waitin' there to kill him."

"Where is he?" asked the Ranger.

Betcha hesitated. "Who are you?" he demanded. "Shore, I know yuh're a friend for yuh got me out of that mess. . . . They been workin' on me since last night." He stifled a groan. "Betcha they stuck me a thousand times if they did once. Lucky my neck's so thick or it would be busted."

He rubbed a hand gingerly about his raw, bleeding throat, where the rope had burned him.

"I'm yore friend, shore enough, Betcha," replied the Ranger earnestly. "And a friend of Major Wynant's, too."

"Are yuh one of the ranchers in Wynant's association? I didn't see yuh at the meetin'."

"No. But what's worryin' yuh? Why don't yuh want to say where the Major is?"

The water had cleared Betcha's mind and strength was returning to him. He made a quick decision. After all, this tall man had snatched him from torture and probably death. Likely he was a friend of Wynant's, as he said.

"The Major's at Clifford's LC, up the river a piece," Betcha said quickly. "The Double U boys are with him, and so is Mimi—she's his niece. But they might get home any time and Teakettle will ambush 'em shore as shootin', I'll betcha!"

"Then the first thing to do is find Wynant and warn him," said Hatfield.

He mounted the golden sorrel and resuming his grip on the black's reins, moved upstream. After a couple of miles Betcha spoke.

"S'pose we miss Wynant?" he said anxiously. "He'd travel the road."

"Yeah, I reckon he would. But we'll chance it."

They recrossed the stream and slanted for the dirt highway. Hatfield was ready for trouble in case he bumped into Teakettle or one of the dwarf's patrols. He handed a spare Colt to Betcha Pittman so the cowboy could defend himself in case there should be a fight.

The road climbed slowly with the rising land. The moonlight showed fine range, patches of timber, and brooks and creeks that were tributary to the river. Betcha could tell him nothing about their surroundings for he was as much of a stranger as Hatfield to this country, knowing only what he had been told.

They had moved around a bend, with Hatfield in the lead, when the Ranger heard the pound of hoofs, and caught sight of a rider galloping toward them.

"Watch it!" he warned, pulling Goldy around.

Betcha followed on the black and they pushed in just at the turn of the low bluff.

But the horseman had seen them. He brought his horse to a sliding halt. "Who's that?" he called.

Metal glinted in the moonlight as he hastily drew a pistol.

Hatfield's slim hand dropped to a Colt. He could see the rider plainly, sitting his saddle in the middle of the stretch.

"Don't shoot!" shouted Betcha. "That's

the Major."

He sang out to his employer and the horses drew nearer together.

"Why, Betcha!" cried the Major, surprised. "What are you doin' here?"

"The ranch was attacked, Major!" Betcha blurted hastily. "I'll betcha it was some of Vale's bunch, though not the same ones who hit you and yore pard on the bayou. They captured me easy and held me till this gent come along and pried me loose from 'em. He done it single-handed and there was fourteen of the crew!"

HATFIELD thought that Betcha deserved a word of praise for his own actions during that stressful period.

"They were danglin' him, jerkin' him up and down, to make him say where you'd gone, Major Wynant," the Ranger said. "They worked on him, beat him for two nights and a day, but he wouldn't give in. Yuh got a brave young hombre workin' for yuh."

"I savvy that." Wynant nodded. "Are yuh all right, now, Betcha? Mimi sent yuh a note."

"Fine!" cried Betcha, all his pains instantly forgotten. "Where is it?"

Wynant smiled as he handed the battered waddy a letter. Betcha struck a match to read the missive.

"We got a lot done," Wynant told him, not realizing that he was unheeded. "I needed a tally book I'd forgot to take with me and thought I'd make a quick trip home and see how yuh was gettin' along holdin' things down, Betcha."

"Yuh'd have run right into Teakettle's hands," said Hatfield.

"Teakettle!" exclaimed Wynant. "Yuh mean he was there? Teakettle Jones, the dwarf?"

"He's just about one," said Hatfield. "Leastways, he's got legs like a weddin' ring."

"He's Archibald Vale's field man," growled Wynant, anger deepening his earnest voice. "*Now* what are they up to?"

McDowell had agreed with Hatfield that the first thing for the Ranger to do was to get in touch with Jackson Wynant, whose complaint had been the final straw tipping the scales as the old Captain at Austin made his decision to send his best officer to Galveston. So Hatfield had made the Double U his first stop, and the results bade fair to be far-reaching. In Wynant's words now there seemed to be a hint of what might be a complicated plot of which the Major could tell.

In the silvery light Hatfield saw that Wynant was a big, heavy man. He wore leather and a dark Stetson. His voice and manner were authoritative, which was natural for a man who, during his years in the army, had been accustomed to command.

Wynant kept peering at Hatfield, trying to get a better view of the tall fellow who had assisted Betcha Pittman, in order to form an opinion. To aid him, Hatfield rolled a quirly and lighted a match, holding it for a few moments to his cigarette end as he puffed.

The flare showed the rugged features of the officer, and the straight look in his gray-green eyes as they met those of the rancher. By the small, flickering light, Hatfield also obtained more details about the Major.

Jackson Wynant, he saw, had thick brown hair streaked with gray, a weathered skin, and serious brown eyes.

The two men stared at one another until the little wooden stick burned to a shriveled ember and flickered out.

"I was on my way to look yuh up, Major," remarked Hatfield. "That's how I happened to drop in on Teakettle's party." He knew that Wynant must be wondering who he was, why he was there. It appeared to be time to satisfy the man's curiosity.

"I see," the Major said. "Is there anything I can do for yuh? I owe yuh a debt I'd be glad to pay."

"S'pose we pow-wow while we ride for the LC?" suggested Hatfield. "I reckon yuh've got enough friends there to run Teakettle off the Double U, haven't yuh?"

"That's right." Wynant nodded.

"Ouch!" said Betcha, behind them. He had been so engrossed in Mimi's note that the last match he had struck had burned his fingers.

"Come on, Betcha," ordered the Ranger. "We're on our way."

He dropped the black's rein for young Pittman seemed able now to handle the horse.

Hatfield rode a few paces ahead

of Betcha, at Wynant's side, as they took the road to Clifford's spread.

"I'm from Austin, Major," the Ranger said abruptly. "Cap'n McDowell sent me. Had yore wire."

Wynant started. "So that's it! I was wonderin'."

Full trust was at once established between the two men, a trust that had first come to life in their steady look at one another.

"I like to work quiet-like for a time until I see what's what," said Hatfield. "I'd appreciate it if yuh'd keep it under yore hat that I'm a Ranger when we meet up with yore friends."

"I'll do just what yuh say," the rancher promised.

Betcha was whistling gaily as his horse plodded after them. He still sagged, but his rescue and the message from Mimi had done wonders for his youthful spirits and physical recuperation.

En route to the LC the Major told Hatfield all he could concerning the problem he and his rancher friends faced. The ranchers had been marketing in Galveston until it had appeared all the cattle buyers in town except Archibald Vale had gone out of business or been forced out. Then Teakettle Jones had come along, representing Vale. The price per head of cattle had dropped so sharply that Wynant had prevailed on his friends not to sell. Fuller and Wynant had been leaders in the revolt.

Finally Vale had sent for them. Wynant told the results of that meeting and how, on the way home, Fuller had died while Wynant had escaped, thanks to Betcha.

"I couldn't swear to the men who killed Abe," Wynant said earnestly. "I didn't see a one of them, because they were all masked. But I do know that Teakettle Jones is Vale's agent. Jones and Vale blame me for the refusal of the other ranchers to sell. Vale has a fleet of ships waitin 'off Galveston to be loaded, but he won't load 'em with our cattle. My new plan is to collect a big herd and drive all the way to New Orleans."

Hatfield ticketed Wynant's information in his keen mind.

"Yuh ever deal with Jake Silver, the Galveston buyer?" he asked.

"Oh yes. Silvers a fine hombre and an honest one. But he ain't buyin' any more. I believe Vale forced him out. Silver's old, but he's no coward. He's shrewd, too, so Vale's power must be so overwhelmin' that Silver savvies it would be suicide to fight. Mebbe yuh heard that a couple of buyers were found in the bay?"

"Yeah," said Hatfield. "But I need details. I'd like a list of the men yuh dealt with before Vale shoved himself into the picture, and all yuh know about 'em. All yuh know about this Vale, too."

Wynant had this information at his fingertips. His description of Archibald Vale so intrigued Hatfield that the Ranger felt he must get after that dangerous operator as soon as possible.

TO VALE, Wynant and his resistance must be a mounting threat. The rancher knew too much about Vale and was leading the fight against the Galveston cattle-buying magnate.

Betcha Pittman, and then the Ranger himself, through his opportune appearance, had staved off death for Wynant. Now the aroused cattlemen were sending out messengers to others, to check the flow of beefs to the seaport, further threatening Vale's monopoly.

The LC spread, Hatfield saw when they reached it, stood in a great widening of the river valley. It was larger than the Double U. There was a roomy ranchhouse, several barns and quarters for a score of punchers.

A mile away were wire corrals in which hundreds on hundreds of cattle had been collected. More were on the way, explained Wynant. Cowboys from several local spreads were watching the herd while others rested, off duty for the time being.

Women and children filled the ranchhouse, and a night crew slept, rolled in blankets, on porches or on the earth.

The Major led the way to the ranchhouse. Lew Clifford was located and Wynant quickly told him what had occurred. The alarm was sounded and as the men made ready to set out for the Double U Hatfield was introduced to local cowmen as a friend.

He met Dave Russell of the Arrow, Olliphant of the Circle O, Ken Ells and Rube Jeffers.

CHAPTER VI

Lair of the Panther

YOUNG Pittman was about on his last legs. He wanted to go with the avengers but Wynant ordered him to stay at the LC and have his numerous hurts dressed. He also needed food and attention, and Mimi Wynant, much concerned about the big cowboy, offered her services as his nurse. That was Betcha's compensation as he saw the men ride off. Jim Hatfield rode with the Major and other ranchers as they led a bunch of fighting waddies toward the Double U.

The first streak of gray dawn was in the sky ahead as the advance pushed around the final bend and the spread came in sight. They could see Wynant's ranchhouse, could see the doors and windows wide open. A carbine cracked and they heard a bullet sing over them.

Picking up speed the Ranger charged in with the ranchers bent on ousting the gunmen intruders. They were a hundred yards away when a man ran from the back door of the house, leaped on a saddled mustang, and flogged away. He turned to fire back at them with a pistol as he galloped downstream.

Eager fighters surged on his trail and guns blared. A hail of lead drove into horse and rider. The animal crashed and his rider flew off and stayed where he landed.

The man was one of Teakettle's followers. He was dead when the cattlemen dismounted and looked him over.

"Teakettle's flown the coop with the rest of his boys," the Ranger told the men. "He left this hombre behind, hopin' he might get a shot at Wynant. He let us get too close. Asleep or drunk, I s'pose."

They picked up a trail. But it was two hours' old and they had little hope of overtaking the dwarf and his men who had fled in the direction of the coast. After a time the chase was called off and they headed back for Wynant's spread. The Double U ranchhouse was in disorder. Windows had been smashed, bullet-holes were in the walls, liquor and food had been consumed and the debris thrown about the rooms.

The task of bringing order out of chaos was too great for the time being, so after a short rest they hit the road for the LC. The sun coming up behind them as they rode.

In the daylight Hatfield studied Wynant and his cattlemen friends. They were hard-working Texas cowmen and their employes, the sturdy type of citizens the Ranger was sworn to protect.

Remembering Hatfield's request that his identity remain a secret until further notice, Major Wynant had introduced the tall man as "Jim Harvey," and this would do until he was ready to show his full hand as a state officer. His presence was explained by Wynant's own announcement that Harvey had stopped off to see him while returning home from a business trip.

Back at the LC, the golden sorrel needed rest and attention. Hatfield wanted food and a sleep, too, before he set out for Galveston. He would see the dwarfish Jones there, for Teakettle and his men would no doubt flee to the Gulf.

"I'll be on their trail in a few hours," thought the Ranger.

Mimi Wynant, to his admiring eyes, was a beautiful girl, and she gave him her brightest smiles, for Betcha had told her how Hatfield had saved his life. Nothing was too good for the tall man and she pressed platters of fried chicken, roast beef, potatoes and other food on him, as well as keeping his tin cup filled with hot coffee. Finally stuffed to the neck, Hatfield found a quiet spot in a hay barn, rolled in his blanket and was quickly asleep. . . .

By late afternoon the heat had diminished. Hatfield woke to the familiar sounds of a big ranch in operation, with busy men at work. More cattle had arrived and were being shunted into the pens. Branding and earmarking had been proceeding.

As soon as he had washed up, Mimi Wynant found him and insisted he eat again. Betcha Pittman was up, limping about. He gave the Ranger his infectious grin.

"How do yuh like my face?" he asked. "Looks like mud the cows stepped on, don't it?"

Betcha was really battered up. He had

been stuck many times with knife points, kicked until he was black and blue. There were raw spots on his throat and on his jaws where the rough lariat had savagely rasped his skin. Both eyes had been blacked and his nose was swollen.

But his spirits had not flagged. He was still ready for a jest, anything that came along. Hatfield admired the huge, blond cowboy, for Betcha had proved his mettle.

AFTER enjoying another meal at the LC, Hatfield led Wynant aside.

"I'm headin' after Teakettle Jones, Major," he said. "I expect his trail will lead to Vale, a dangerous hombre to be operatin' in Texas and one who must be stopped. As a guess I'd say Vale has bigger plans than beatin' you into submission, and forcin' yuh to sell him yore cattle at a loss. That kind of turkey usually does. I like to check up before I strike, savvy? So I'll see what I can see in Galveston. Meanwhile I'd advise you ranchers to stick together till yuh hear further from me. Vale's apt to lash out mighty rough when he finds that Teakettle has dropped the beans and showed his hand. Lettin' Betcha escape was a mighty bad mistake the dwarf made."

"Bueno." Wynant nodded gravely. "Luck, Ranger. We'll be waitin' to hear from yuh and we'll be at yore command."

He shook hands and Hatfield turned to the saddled sorrel. He mounted and took the road to the Gulf, to brace the menace he was sure was lurking in Galveston.

On his arrival on the island, he made it his first business to find out all he could about Archibald Vale. He wanted to know more about the man's business deals, how he lived, what were his plans and ambitions.

It was not difficult to discover the location of Vale's home, for it was one of the show places of the city, situated where it overlooked the blue of the Gulf. Hatfield set out for the place promptly, on a tour of investigation, after he had picked up what other information he could.

The open character of the beach on which Archibald Vale's mansion stood forced the Ranger to leave Goldy some distance below the spot, where sand dunes provided a hiding place for his horse.

He tried walking in his high-heeled boots but sank to his ankles in the sand. Returning to change to moccasins, which he carried in his pack for stealthy work, Hatfield was then enabled to reach the dark side of the flat-roofed building which was Vale's home. If possible, he wanted to get in a position where he would be able to hear Teakettle Jones report to Archibald Vale.

The dwarf had arrived in Galveston only that evening. He must have made a stop somewhere along the way, since Hatfield had arrived first. Hatfield had been watching for his distinctive figure, for Teakettle was easy to pick out in a crowd. The Ranger had been hanging around the port for some time before Teakettle reached town and headed for a waterfront saloon to eat and drink. Somewhere between the Double U and the coast Jones had parted with his men and had spent the intervening time at some mischief as yet unknown to the Ranger. Teakettle looked dejected and tired. After fortifying himself with liquor and food he had mounted his lathered horse and ridden south from the city to Vale's, whose home Hatfield had already scouted from a distance while waiting for Teakettle's appearance.

The large house on the sea stood on an artificially constructed eminence, built from great blocks of stone and guarded from the lashing waves by a strong seawall. Earth had been carted here so that plants could grow, and there were flower gardens and shade trees. Orange and myrtle, oleander and roses, many lush tropical blooms mingled their perfumes with the salt aroma of the ocean.

The thick stone walls had been painted white, and there were long windows open on all sides so that no matter what the summer heat might be, the house would always be cool. On the north side was a great studio window. The flat roof was decked for lounging, with awnings and a rail around the perimeter.

A fountain played beside the house in the formal gardens. There were quarters for servants separated from the main structure. It was a rich man's place and an expensive one, as lights blazing from the many rooms testified.

To the north the lights of Galveston colored the sky. The city lay at the upper end of the thirty-one-mile island which was separated from the mainland by West

Bay. The low, sandy isle formed one of the chain of barriers protecting the Texas coast from the ravages of the mighty waters. Off the port, the riding lights of anchored schooners and other ships blinked as the vessels rose and fell with the swell.

IT WAS clear weather here but somewhere there had been a storm and waves pounded the beach and smashed at the seawall. The breaking surf offered monotonous but soothing overtones to less majestic sounds such as the voices of men, the stampings and occasional whinnies of Vale's horses in the stables, the gentle splashing of the fountain and the faint brushings made by Hatfield's moccasins as he sought a vantage point. He had only to make sure he was not observed, and this proved easy enough, for evidently no alarm had reached Archibald Vale who must feel secure in his castlelike abode.

Hatfield did not have long to wait. Soon Teakettle Jones was admitted through the big doors on the land side. Hatfield soon discovered he had been taken to the main studio which occupied the entire southern wing. There, windows faced the sea and others were on two other sides. The butler who brought Teakettle here left him and the dwarf removed his Stetson and waited his master's pleasure.

A thin, nervous man in a blue smock, with a velvet beret on his black hair was busy before a large easel. Sideburns swept up to his high cheek bones and a silk scarf was knotted at his throat. On the easel stood a marine painting on which the artist was at work. Hatfield could make out a large mermaid figure and another on the canvas he thought must be Neptune, with trident and crown. Set around the spacious chamber on other stands were a dozen highly colored studies depicting realities and fantasies of the sea.

Hatfield, pushed between an ornamental shrub and the wall, close to the French window which was open to the breeze, could hear as well as observe what went on in the studio.

"Here I am, Mr. Vale," said Teakettle, standing first on one bowed leg and then the other.

"Hold your tongue," snapped Vale. "I'm at work."

He was left-handed, using his brush so, and held a palette, with daubs of oil paints, in his right hand. He stepped back a few paces to study the effect he had obtained.

Teakettle kept hissing apologetically and Vale impatiently threw down the palette and brush and turned on him.

"Why have you come here to bother me?" he demanded.

Teakettle clenched a cold corncob pipe in his wide mouth. His shaggy hair curled around his ears and his clothes showed the wear and dirt of long days of riding.

"I got awful bad news, Mr. Vale," he got the courage to say.

Archibald Vale moved away from the easel and leaned against the high back of a French chair, his sharp face shadowed and his flecked eyes burning as they drilled into Teakettle's soul. He waited as Teakettle blurted the sad story of his failure at the Double U.

"Wynant must have gone to Clifford's LC and driven his best beefs with him," Teakettle said eagerly, as if in extenuation. "We captured the Double U but the Major wasn't around. Only one big cowboy was there, and he wouldn't tell where his boss was. I waited and worked on this waddy the best I knew how but somebody rescued the cuss the second night. I s'pose it was a bunch of Wynant's friends, though I ain't shore. We thought we better sashay then, but I left a man to dry-gulch Wynant in case he showed up. I ain't heard from him.

"The boys hustled back to town but I doubled around and later had a look at the LC. I couldn't get close enough to make out who was there, but I seen a lot of riders and a real big herd they're makin' ready." Hissings punctuated his confession. "I'm mighty sorry, Mr. Vale. I done the best a feller could, but luck was against me."

"Excuses!" snarled Vale. " 'He who excuses himself accuses himself'." He blew up then, and his language became violent as he told Teakettle off. " 'He who is born a fool is never cured!' " he ended.

Vale flung himself about the room with the fury of an angry panther. He waved his white hands, he kicked over a chair and the blood reddened his burning cheeks.

After a time he ran out of breath and paced back and forth in silence.

"I hate this sort of thing," Vale finally

complained as he finished his bout of thinking and came to a halt facing Teakettle. "My art comes first. You ought to be able to handle a few stupid ranchers, Jones. My ships must be loaded, you understand? Here they lie off the shore, waiting cargoes and you come to me with a sniveling yarn like this one. I've cornered the market at this port, there's a fortune in Cuba, and we must deliver. I see plainly what's happened. Wynant has prevailed on his friends to collect a large herd and drive to another port, perhaps New Orleans. I'll have those steers or know the reason why!"

"The ranchers and their men are mighty tough when they're roused up," objected Teakettle. "I ain't got enough fighters to go against 'em all together."

"Be quiet," ordered Vale. "I'll think this out."

CHAPTER VII

Evil Plans

VALE did some more pacing, a dark frown on his thin face. Teakettle forlornly pulled out a package of shredded tobacco and began to fill his pipe.

"You can't smoke in here," snapped Vale. "The smell of tobacco smoke annoys me. Wait until you get outside. Now listen to me. I want you to go and bring Crane Riley to me as soon as you can locate him. He should be in the city, perhaps at Peggoty's."

"Yes, suh," Teakettle said with alacrity. He was glad to leave the vicinity of his savage-tempered employer. He saluted and stumped out. Hatfield saw the dwarf ride off toward the city.

Turning his attention back to Archibald Vale he saw the man go over to a gold-leaf cabinet standing in a corner. He took a jeweled snuffbox from a drawer and daintily pinched the powder under his flared nostrils. He sneezed violently several times and wiped his face with a silk kerchief.

For a while then, as if given inspiration, Vale strode up and down the room. Once he tried to resume his painting, but the disturbance of mind created by Teakettle's news had wrecked his rendezvous with the muse. He crossed to the wide windows looking seaward and stared at the moonlit, restless expanse, his back to Hatfield.

Patiently the Ranger waited, squatting outside his window. The earth was cool and the shrubbery afforded a perfect screen. He had not heard the name of Crane Riley mentioned before and his curiosity as a lawman was piqued.

Music came floating out to him after a time, and he peered into the studio. Vale sat at a melodeon in a far corner, working the treadles with his slippered feet, his thin body swaying to and fro in rhythm to the nostalgic air he was playing.

It was a long vigil the Ranger kept, for it was after one A.M. when Teakettle Jones and another man rode up and dropped rein in the back yard of Vale's mansion. Vale had sent his servants to bed and himself opened a rear door to admit his two aides. They repaired to the studio. The Ranger was cramped from his long wait, but he was careful to make no betraying sounds as he watched and listened.

The "Crane" Riley, he saw, was a long, leathery man, a taciturn individual. He had the hard-bitten look characteristic of some New Englanders. He was smooth-shaven and his thin, attenuated nose at once showed whence he had derived his nickname. He wore shoes instead of boots, sailor's blue trousers, and he removed a short jacket of the sort used by seamen. His cap, too, reminded the Ranger of ships, being a knit affair which fitted tightly about his bony cranium.

His greenish eyes had a fishy glare which never changed. His brown hair was cropped close and the knuckles of his hands stood out like walnuts. When he took off his coat Hatfield saw the sailor's knife in its oiled sheath he wore. His gray shirt bulged at the armpits and Hatfield decided that Riley carried his firearms in shoulder holsters, hidden from public view.

But though there were so many suggestions of the sea in Riley's garb and general appearance, he did not have the rolling gait and other characteristics of the deepwater man. As the Ranger listened he decided that the Crane was a denizen of that intermediate world between land

and ocean, living close to the shore and taking a living from the commerce plying back and forth. He had a trader's keen bearing.

"Sit down, Crane." Vale nodded toward a chair. "Help yourself to a drink."

The man had gained command of his temper now and anyway he seemed to hold Riley in higher respect than he did Teakettle Jones.

TEAKETTLE took a glass of whisky but Riley shook his head, refusing to drink.

"What's wrong?" he asked. His thin voice had a nasal twang, and he seemed sure of himself.

"We're in a bad situation," explained Vale. "It's Wynant again. Has Teakettle told you what happened at the Double U?"

"Yeah. On our way out." Riley cursed in a fluent but dispassionate manner. "Tough luck I missed Wynant that night on the bayou."

Vale nodded grimly. "He's carried the warning back to the range. I must load my ships. I'm in this too deep to pull back. Between you and me there's more to it than just the cattle deal. With what is realized from the Cuban business we'll expand. We can smash the pier owners here just as we did the buyers. With Galveston in my pocket we'll invade other ports. You see the long range aspect?"

"Sure." Riley nodded. "You'll be king of the coast. But we got to fill our contracts with the armies in Cuba first."

"We've been temporarily checked by Wynant," Vale admitted. "Yet defeat isn't bitter unless you swallow it. The wise man turns chance into good fortune. I've thought this out from every angle. Wynant has stopped all but trickles of cattle from coming to Galveston. He and his friends are collecting a herd big enough to load all my schooners. It's held at the LC, Clifford's ranch a few miles from the Double U above Terryville. I intend to have that beef. Since they refuse to accept my price they'll get nothing, but I'll ship their beefs to Cuba notwithstanding."

"Yeah?" said the Crane. "If they're all together at the LC there must be a bunch of men to guard the cows."

"How about your Dockrats?" asked Vale. "You command a small army on the waterfront. You did excellent work for me cleaning up cattle buyers, even if you did let Wynant slip between your fingers."

Riley stuck out his lower lip as he slowly shook his head.

"My boys are good fighters on foot and if you let 'em pick their own ground," he said in his nasal whine. "You know I'd do anything for you I could, but if I take 'em inland against a band of cowboys shootin' from horseback the Dockrats would be as bad off as range riders at sea. Look what happened at the bayou. I set a perfect ambush but the plugs we had stampeded and a couple of steer chasers run circles around us. I should have slipped a knife into Wynant's back ribs while he was in town but you wanted it kept quiet, said that would make too much of a fuss."

The Ranger ticketed the information. Riley's Dockrats must have killed Abe Fuller and wounded Major Wynant in the bayou fight. This fitted in with what Betcha had told Hatfield about the attackers. Vale had had to muster his gunhands in a hurry to trap the two ranch-

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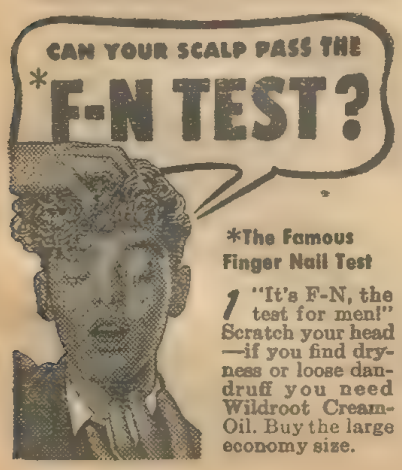
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WILDROOT CREAM-OIL Hair Tonic

ers and no doubt Teakettle's men had not been immediately available, so he had been forced to fall back on the Dockrats.

Vale was considering the Crane's objections.

"You're absolutely right," he finally said. "We must be certain this time. Teakettle hadn't enough strength to destroy our enemies, which is why he failed. . . . Be quiet while I think."

He began his pacing, moving back and forth, his small white hands clasped behind him. When he had reached his decision he swung on the dwarf.

"Is Horsemouth Eagen still in Galveston?" he demanded.

"Yes, suh. I seen him at Peggoty's with his sweetheart, Maggie Mulcahy, while I was huntin' Riley. He's takin' a vacation."

"He's my man," announced Vale. "Teakettle, get hold of Eagen at ten tomorrow evening and bring him here secretly. You understand I don't want such fellows seen coming to my home, so be sure that no one does."

"Yes, suh," said Teakettle. "If Horsemouth agrees I'll fetch him."

The Ranger was well aware who "Horsemouth" Eagen was. The previous spring Eagen had been operating west of the Pecos and Hatfield's arrival over there had sent the rustler scurrying for cover. Rumor later reaching Austin had it that Eagen, chief of a large band, had crossed the Rio Grande and there had made his headquarters, stealing cows in south Texas and selling the wet cattle in Mexican Gulf ports. With the Cuban war flaming, an insatiable beef market existed, and it was hay-making time for such men as Eagen.

Teakettle indicated by loud hissing that he had more to say.

"In case Horsemouth won't play, Mr. Vale," he finally got out, "I could get Blackjack Finnegan. He's got sixty, seventy men camped in the Brazos Bottoms not far from here."

"We'll hold Finnegan in reserve," said Vale. "Eagen is a better man to deal with."

"Yes, suh," Teakettle said meekly. "Whatever yuh say."

HATFIELD concluded from what he heard that now the dangerous Vale had decided to enlist expert rustlers to seize the herds of Wynant and his friends. Being forewarned was an excellent weapon in such a situation.

The gilt French clock on Vale's ornate mantel chimed twice and the breeze that wafted over the growling of the surf brought the sounds of ships' bells ringing four times. Vale waved a hand to dismiss his trusted lieutenants.

"Tomorrow night, then," he said, with a sigh. "But how I hate this strife! My art comes first, but chances rule men and not men chances."

Teakettle hissed his agreement, but the Crane Riley only shrugged as he pulled on his jacket. The two trooped out, mounted their waiting horses and rode toward the city. There were lights on in waterfront taverns and in a few homes, but for the most part Galveston slept, gaining strength for the morrow.

Vale lighted a candle and blew out his expensive lamps. He was immersed in thought as he slowly walked into his sleeping chamber off the studio, where he went to bed in a four-poster, an imported European antique with an elegant brocade tester.

The Ranger slipped away, with the salt smell of the sea in his nostrils. Making a detour of Vale's premises, he picked up Goldy and hunted for a spot to sleep. He found one in the barn where he stabled the sorrel. . . .

When he awoke to a fair day he had formed his plans. He wished to snare not only Riley and Teakettle Jones, but Archibald Vale, the menacing brains of the Galveston bunch.

"That cuss used Crane Riley to scare out Jake Silver and the other dealers," he thought. "And the Dockrats killed Fuller. Teakettle was Vale's contact man with the range. Now he'll enlist Horsemouth Eagen and that sidewindin' rustler will try to get busy."

The Ranger was too experienced at his work not to realize that if Horsemouth saw him first the startled Eagen would betray him to Vale. So he had decided to make use of the rustler chief in his Galveston campaign and to give him a wide berth. According to word that had reached Ranger headquarters, Horsemouth held Jim Hatfield in healthy respect and awe.

Hatfield did not think that such a man as Eagen who, as Teakettle had said, was taking a vacation, would be up so early.

Just the same his gray-green eyes kept an alert watch as he went to breakfast at a tavern on the Strand, Galveston's principal commercial artery.

Already the busy port hummed with activity, wholesalers and sellers bargaining loudly in the long white market sheds, Negro stevedores and hosts of other laborers shouting and dancing as they went about their tasks. Two-wheeled carts were again in demand as schooners anchored in the shallows and other ships tied to wharves were being unloaded.

At one spot a small steam engine was shunting cars onto a pier, an innovation which greatly reduced the time needed to load or unload. Warehouses and wooden docks raised over the water formed a network about the town.

Twice raging fires had devastated the Strand but the thoroughfare had been quickly rebuilt. Most of Galveston had been built on sand, but there were large homes set back from the sea and about these grew shade trees and the rich blossoms of the tropics. The air was heavy with the perfume of flowers—roses, oleander, magnolia and other blooms. Shaded bowers were within a stone's throw of the salt spray and the ocean.

Galveston itself was trim and elegant although much of the island was in a wild state, with cattle wandering about the outskirts. Dismantled fortifications near the bridge were a constant reminder that the Civil War had come to Galveston.

The twin towers of the new cathedral, the tower of the walled city jail and other high points were framed against the rosy sky for Hatfield to admire. But for him the business quarter had a quaint appearance due to the jetties and wharves, many with buildings on them and stretching away from the town.

The day was pleasantly warm and enjoyable but then, as Hatfield knew, the citizens of Galveston seldom complained of the heat for the sea breezes cooled the city. It was a busy day, also. Drays on the dusty roadways were laden with cotton bales on their way to export.

A RAILROAD track on a flimsy open trestle led to Houston, fifty miles away, and sea-island cotton was in great demand. Besides cotton, hides and wool and cattle formed the chief exports, the imports being coffee, salt, crockery, iron and tin.

Sturdy immigrants came through Galveston too, arriving in a steady stream, hurrying to help tame the Texas hinterland, a huge empire teeming with untold riches.

Hatfield, enjoying his study of the town, took his time over his ham, eggs and coffee. Hot muffins disappeared from before him at a surprising rate as he filled up. He could watch the passing traffic through the windows, and could see if Horsemouth Eagen put in an appearance. But such a man as Horsemouth, unless at work, would not show himself in the early light of day.

The Ranger scouted Peggoty's that morning. It was at the upper end of the city, and the low structure was of weathered wood, the paint peeling from the boards. Half of it stuck out over the bay, blackened posts covered with barnacles supporting its sagging floor beams. A sign running the width over the street end said:

PEGGOTY'S
FINEST WHISKIES, BEER & WINES
SEA FOOD

The small windows with their leaded panes looked as though they had never been opened, let alone washed. Cobwebs and a film of grease from frying foods inside, and smoke outside, made the glass opaque.

It was a large place and must have numerous cubbyholes besides the main bar opening into the road. Sailors and others in search of a rousing time would frequent Peggoty's.

CHAPTER VIII

Horsemouth Eagen

HATFIELD had left Goldy at a corral, for he did not need the horse in the city. In moving about Galveston in the daylight he did not care to show himself unduly, so it was best for him to walk the short distances necessary to reach his various objectives.

A block from Peggoty's, he discovered, stood an old houseboat embedded in the harbor mud, and canted to one side. The windows were boarded up, but the door sagged open. It had been deserted even by the poorest of waterfront waifs, only wharf rats now using it for shelter. Scouting this, Hatfield decided it might do nicely for his purpose. While inside the flooring had rotted away at the shore end he could walk along a thick beam and reach an inner room which would afford an excellent hiding-place.

Leaving the houseboat for the time being, he turned his attention to other matters.

Capain McDowell had mentioned a cattle dealer named Jake Silver. So had Major Wynant. It was in the cards that the Ranger call on Silver who might have important information concerning Archibald Vale. Discreet inquiry sent the officer to a cottage on the bay. A rap at the door brought a small man, with a fringe of white whiskers and shrewd blue eyes.

"If yuh're sellin' cattle, friend, I've retired," said the old man as he took in Hatfield's range outfit.

"Yuh're Jake Silver?" asked the Ranger.

"That's me."

Silver was apprehensive. He kept licking his lip as Hatfield pushed into the kitchen and towered over him. Then his eyes lighted and he jumped as he recognized the silver star on silver circle cupped in the visitor's slim hand. It was the emblem of the Texas Rangers.

"Cap'n McDowell guaranteed yuh, Mr. Silver," said Hatfield. "I'm here to clean up Galveston." He smiled wryly. "Though yuh may think that's a large order."

"Sit down, sit down!" the old man said eagerly. "Yuh're mighty welcome. But it shore will take a heap of cleanin' a lot more dangerous than sweepin' the floor to make this town smell right again."

Silver brought out a bottle and glasses, and took a chair across the table from Hatfield. He answered the Ranger's questions freely.

His story corroborated a good deal of what Hatfield had already learned. The Crane Riley's Dockrats probably had slain the buyers who had dared defy Archibald Vale, and more than likely they had been Wynant's attackers.

"After what's happened here only a fool would buck Vale in the open," Silver declared. "I'm burnin' up inside but I can't see a way yet to fight with any chance of winnin'." Silver was no coward, as the Ranger had been assured, but nothing could be proved against the Dockrats and Vale. "I tell yuh, Vale's goin' to grab all Galveston!" warned the cattle buyer, banging a fist on the table.

"Yuh reckon yore pards would fight together against Vale if the right opportunity shows?" asked Hatfield.

"We buyers would, but we're too few to beat Vale. If the dock owners and big fellers would come in with us we could do it, but you savvy human nature, Ranger. Vale ain't gone after 'em yet, and they don't realize the danger. Yuh'd have to prove it to 'em."

"I'm just goin' to work here," said Hatfield, "and mebbe I'll do just that. And I may call on yuh when the time comes. Watch for me. I'll be in touch." After a little more talk, the Ranger left. . . .

At dark Hatfield posted himself at a vantage point near Peggoty's. He watched the entrance as sailors and other customers came and went. The bar blazed with hanging oil lamps, and the smell of cooking fish and chips, mingling with odors of wet mud and decaying wood, assailed the Ranger's nostrils.

Somewhere in Galveston lurked Horsemouth Eagen, taking the sea air and relaxing after a strenuous season of rustling on the Mexican Border. There was no guarantee that Horsemouth would visit Peggoty's that night but Vale had seemed to think he would when he had ordered Teakettle Jones to enlist the cow thief in his nefarious scheme. As a rule such outlaws would frequent a spot they believed safe. On the dodge, constantly expecting arrest, a tavern like Peggoty's might well represent the nearest thing to a home's security that they could ever enjoy.

"If I miss him here," mused Hatfield, "I'll pick him up later on at Vale's."

That, however, would force a change in his plans, and he hoped he could trap Eagen before Teakettle found him.

THE cathedral bells slowly rang out the hour of nine while the clangor of the ships' bells, chiming twice, came from the water. So far Hatfield had not seen either

Teakettle Jones or the Crane Riley at Peggoty's, and certainly Horsemouth Eagen was not there in the bar where music and the confused murmur of many voices sounded.

Hatfield's eyes were centered on the place when a shining carriage driven by a Negro in a frock coat and a battered silk hat decorated with a red feather in the band, pulled up before the tavern. Hatfield grew alert. A large man in a dark suit and big Stetson alighted and turned to hand down a young woman in a wide-skirted silk dress and a small, fashionable bonnet. As the fellow turned toward his companion the light from the lamp over the entrance fell on his features.

It was Horsemouth Eagen, the rustler chief!

Horsemouth and his lady friend entered Peggoty's, the swinging doors oscillating after the blow given them by the rustler's heavy hand.

The Ranger moved in to look over the batwings. Eagen was saluting Peggoty, the proprietor, an enormously fat Portuguese in a silk shirt and velvet trousers. Peggoty sat in an easy chair, fanning himself, behind the cashier at the front of the dive. Gold rings an inch in diameter depended from his swarthy ears. He was a person of substance, made wealthy by the dollars spent in his tavern.

On the right stretched the main bar with men crowded before it. Tenders were serving the sailors, toughs and sightseers. On the other side of the room were tables for serving meals, and in between was a space for dancers with dampened sawdust on the oak floor. Musicians banged away at piano and violins.

Doors led to the interior which projected over the murky waters of the bay. One of them, used by aproned waiters with trays, must lead to the kitchens. Another was marked "Private." In the center was an opening into a corridor. Horsemouth Eagen, politely steering his lady by an elbow, threaded through the gathering toward this, which Hatfield guessed would be the way to private rooms.

Eagen had a rangy body and quick blue eyes which were eternally darting from side to side. He had purchased "city" clothes for his stay in Galveston, possibly in a fond hope he was disguising himself. He was wearing new boots and on his thick chestnut hair was posed an enormous pearl-gray Stetson.

He had earned his sobriquet because of a malformation of his jaws. His buck teeth stuck out ahead of him so far that had he walked into a wall in the dark they would have been first to strike the obstruction. This had shaped out his lips and chin so that his mouth looked like that of a horse. Nothing could have disguised him save a full mask.

The woman with Horsemouth was probably the Maggie Mulcahy whom Teakettle had mentioned, decided Hatfield. She had hair the color of fresh-baked brick, a freckled but fair complexion and was pretty in a bold way. A diamond ring sparkled in the lamplight as she took care to flash it. Her reticule was new and expensive.

The couple disappeared down the hall, escorted by a colored waiter. Hatfield, with only an hour's leeway before Teakettle Jones should arrive, entered the saloon and with the air of a man who knows just where he is going, moved toward the rear. Peggoty's heavy-lidded eyes touched him, but without interest, then swung to a drunken sailor who had just staggered in. Hatfield went on, and soon found the private room in which Horsemouth Eagen and Maggie were cozily ensconced.

It was at the far end of the pavilion, over the water. Wide windows brought a cooling breeze into the room which was furnished with a table, chairs, a hanging lamp, a rug and curtains. The waiter was taking the order for drinks and supper and Hatfield could see through the door which was still open. Maggie's back was to the Ranger and Eagen faced the entry.

The presence of the girl complicated the maneuver the Ranger contemplated, but he hoped to ease the rustler away from her without a rumpus. The shaft of lamplight fell full on his tall figure as he stopped and fixed Eagen with a cold stare.

Horsemouth had just said, "And a double order of steak for the young lady-y!" As he spoke the last word he recognized the man in the hall and prolonged the final syllable with his big mouth wide open. The sound he made was much like a horse's neigh and he jumped six inches out of his chair.

"What is it, dear?" asked Maggie.

LEFT arm akimbo, right hand hanging limp close to the heavy Colt at his hip, Hatfield jerked his head in a silent command to the rustler. Eagen kept his own hands in sight over the table. Fear flickered in his eyes. It was a crucial moment in Hatfield's play, for he did not want Eagen to go for a gun. He believed that Horsemouth would listen to reason if he got a chance to talk to the rustler.

"Nothin', nothin'," chattered Horsemouth. "See here, sugar plum, you tell the boy what to fetch. I'll be right back."

He rose and came around the table toward the door with the air of a victim fascinated by a hypnotist.

Hatfield stepped back out of sight as Maggie Mulcahy turned. Close at hand was another room not yet occupied and the Ranger pointed to it. Eagen went in and the officer followed, closing the door.

"Yuh've come for me!" muttered Horsemouth.

He was bold enough under ordinary circumstances, but he knew Hatfield's reputation and speed and respect and fear dominated him. The rustler was too shrewd to monkey with the Rangers.

"I don't want to worry yore lady friend," growled Hatfield. "Tell her yuh got business, Eagen, and for her to go on home."

"And then?"

"Then walk out ahead of me, savvy? One wrong move and yuh're shark bait."

"Yuh're arrestin' me?"

"No, not yet. I got a proposition."

A wild hope showed in Horsemouth's blue eyes. "I'm rich, Ranger!" he said eagerly. "If yuh'll talk it over with me I'll shore be glad to do anything yuh say."

"Go tell her yuh have to leave," Hatfield said coldly.

He had instilled in Eagen the idea there might be a chance to escape later on, so Horsemouth obediently opened the door and went to the other room where Maggie Mulcahy was waiting.

"I'm goin' out on important business, sugar," he said. "Have yore supper and I'll meet yuh later on at home."

"Well, I like that!" Maggie's temper flared. "You sit right down there like a gent. Never mind business."

"I got to run, so help me." Eagen's voice was desperate. "See yuh when I'm through."

Without more argument he turned and joined the waiting Ranger, who slouched just outside.

Hatfield shoved the rustler chief ahead of him, up the corridor. Eagen walked as he had directed. As they entered the crowded bar Hatfield glanced back. Maggie Mulcahy had come into the hall and was staring after them. Hatfield did not like having the woman see him but there was nothing he could do about it. He hunched his shoulders and hustled Horsemouth outside.

"This way," he said.

Taking a grip on Eagen's biceps he ran his captive south along the waterfront, to the decaying houseboat he had discovered a block from Peggoty's.

"In there?" wavered Horsemouth.

"Shore. Here's a match. Strike it soon as yuh're inside."

CHAPTER IX

Substitute

WATER blocked them inside the houseboat, save for a couple of blackened beams, they saw as the little flame came up. Eagen went shakily across the narrow timber and stopped in the sagging door of the inner cabin. Hatfield was right with him and lighted a candle stub he had taken care to fetch along.

A wharf rat scurried past them, escaping to the outer part of the boat. Hatfield pushed the old door shut. It was dank and close in the cabin, for the two little squares which had been windows were boarded up. Water lapped at the sides of the houseboat.

Horsemouth turned to face the tall officer.

"Well, yuh got me, Hatfield," he said. "What next? Why yuh brought me here? Yuh want money?" He puled a large roll from his pocket.

"Yuh savvy me better than that, Horsemouth," drawled the Ranger.

"Yeah. But what's yore proposition?" Eagen looked dejected. "Yuh said yuh had one."

"Ever hear of an hombre named Archibald Vale?"

By Horsemouth's blink and the thrusting out of the jaw, Hatfield decided that Eagen had.

"Plus Teakettle Jones and the Crane Riley?" he went on. "Vale's sendin' Teakettle to see yuh this evenin'. I beat 'em to it. I might not have spotted yuh in town at all if it hadn't been for Vale."

"Cuss his heart and and soul!" Eagen swore fervently.

"Where's yore gun?" inquired the Ranger.

Horsemouth shrugged. He raised his hands and locked them overhead and Hatfield relieved him of a Colt which was thrust into his belt under his light coat. The candle, set on a ledge, guttered and smoked. A stream of hot tallow ran along the beam and turned white as it stopped and hardened.

The Ranger took a sheet of paper and a pencil stub from a pocket.

"Write as I tell yuh," he commanded the rustler.

Horsemouth gulped. He accepted the paper and pencil and, placing the paper against a smooth wall of the cabin, looked at the Ranger inquiringly. Hatfield dictated:

" 'Dear Vale: Meet my pard Jim Harvey. I am sick. But trust him like you would me.' "

The rustler's pencil did not move. He scowled.

"What's the game?"

"I'm after Vale and the Galveston bunch," Hatfield said shortly. "Go on—write."

Horsemouth still procrastinated. "S'pose I do like yuh say? What then?"

"That's up to me. I told yuh there was a chance for yuh if yuh help the Rangers. That should be enough for yuh." A harsh note came into Hatfield's drawl.

"I don't feel like ropin' anybody," began Eagen.

The Ranger took a step toward the rustler. The gray-green eyes were cold, and there was menace in the lithe officer. Eagen hastily turned to the wall and began writing, slowly and painfully.

When he had finished he silently handed the paper to Hatfield. It had come out:

Dere Vale. I'm sik. Meet my pard Jim Harve. Trust him lik yuh wood me.
Horsemouth Eagen.

Hatfield folded the introduction and shoved it into a shirt pocket.

"Yuh'll let me go now?" asked Horsemouth eagerly. "I promise not to horn in."

"Later." Hatfield had made his preparations earlier, and now he brought out several lengths of rawhide cord. "Put yore paws behind yuh," he ordered.

He fastened Eagen's wrists and ankles, gagged him carefully with the rustler's own large silk kerchief, and left him there in the darkness, the inner door pulled to.

Psychology had conquered Horsemouth Eagen but as yet Vale, Teakettle and the Crane Riley did not know the Ranger power, his blinding speed with his guns, nor the strategy and tactics which had brought Jim Hatfield to the position he occupied.

Back at Peggoty's, Hatfield scouted the dive again. It was more crowded than before but Maggie Mulcahy was not around. He hoped she had obeyed Eagen's order and gone home. As he slouched outside, a rider came up, stopped, and dropped his reins. The short, thick-bodied Teakettle Jones dismounted and crossed the board sidewalk to the batwings, an odd figure with his beefy torso and shoulders as broad as Hatfield's. He wore belted guns.

HATFIELD followed Teakettle inside. Jones' black beard bristled and he puffed away at his corncob pipe. He paused to speak to Peggoty, and the fat proprietor gesticulated with his brown hands as he informed Jones that Eagen had left.

Teakettle hissed in disappointment. "Shore thought I'd find him."

He swung away and stepped on Hatfield's toe. The dwarf's small eyes sought the gray-green ones. The Ranger scowled, looking big and tough.

"Excuse me, mister." Teakettle let off steam past the bit of his pipe.

"All right this time," growled Hatfield. "What yuh want with Horsemouth?" He kept his voice down.

The dwarf started. "Yuh savvy where I can find him?"

"Come outside where we can powwow."

Jones trailed him to the sidewalk.

"My pard was here earlier," explained Hatfield when they were out of ear-shot of anyone. "But he was took sick. He

done went home. I heard yuh askin' Peggoty about him. Anything I can do for yuh?"

Teakettle had orders to get Eagen. He was hesitant, but Hatfield's manner was convincing.

"Got an important job for Eagen," he said.

"He ain't workin' now. He's takin' a vacation. Me, too."

"This is shore big," argued Teakettle, hissing away. "Lead me to yore friend. He'll know me. My name's Teakettle Jones."

"I'll go ask him and see what he says, mebbe. Who wants him?"

"Tell him Archibald Vale."

"All right. Hang around here. I'll be back in a jiffy."

Half an hour later, a few minutes after ten, Hatfield rode up before Peggoty's on Goldy. He dismounted and Teakettle Jones slid from the shadows.

"What's he say?" asked Jones.

"I fetched a note," said Hatfield. "Horsemouth is mighty sick."

By the outside lantern, Teakettle read the authority which Eagen had given the tall man.

'Shucks," hissed Jones. "But I reckon it will have to do. Come on, Harve."

"The name's Harvey," said the Ranger.

They crossed to the Strand and, picking up speed there, hurried toward Vale's mansion to the south of the town.

Teakettle Jones hopped off his black gelding in the shadows of Vale's stables. There was another saddled horse waiting there with dropped rein.

"Stick here, Harvey," ordered Teakettle. "I'll take yore note to Vale."

After a short wait Hatfield saw the dwarf coming back, accompanied by a bony man who peered hard at the tall fellow in the shadows.

"This here is Crane Riley," introduced Teakettle. "Come on in, Harvey. The boss wants to see yuh."

Hatfield's long legs took one stride for the little cattle thief's two as they headed for the house. Riley, who had only grunted at him, walked at the Ranger's other side. Hatfield decided the Crane had come to check on him and watch him until Vale was sure of the substitute Horsemouth Eagen had sent to him.

They went through a back entry, through a shining kitchen and a long hall from which other rooms opened, and on to Vale's studio.

"Step inside," ordered Teakettle.

The Ranger went in and stood there in the light, facing Vale, the man who would be master of Galveston. Vale wore a smock, and beneath it his thin body was tensed. He held his air of superiority, augmented by a haughty glint in his flecked eyes. In his left hand was a brush wet with blue paint.

"Good evening," he said, his voice petulant.

"Howdy, suh."

Hatfield's chin strap was taut, accenting his rugged jaw which badly needed a shave. His slim hands hung by the big Colts in his supple holsters. His entire aspect was fierce, for he knew the manners of egotistical outlaws and could act such a part to perfection, could be as rude as Vale himself.

He passed Vale's first inspection.

"Sit down." Vale nodded.

Riley and Hatfield took chairs but the sturdy Teakettle stayed by the door, hissing away and chewing on his cold pipe.

Vale began pacing the floor. "I know your partner, Eagen," he said. "We did a little work together a year or two ago while I was down in the Big Bend country. Sorry he's laid up. What seems to be the matter?"

"It took him all of a sudden, suh," Hatfield said. "I figger he's had too good a time here in Galveston."

"I see. I'm in a hurry or I'd wait till he's on his feet again, Harvey. I have a big job in your line, and I don't want any slips. How many men can you muster and how quickly?"

VALE'S eyes drilled the Ranger, who was rapidly trying to estimate how many rustlers Vale would want. He must also sound plausible, for a mistake here could mean instant death for himself and the end of his assistance to Wynant's people.

"I'd say fifty, offhand," he finally said. "We pick up hombres when we need 'em sometimes."

Hatfield was aware that the Crane Riley's fishy eyes were fixed on him, but Riley looked away as he returned the stare.

Vale thought it over, then said, "Teakettle, with your band it should do the trick. Crane can stand by near Galveston and help hold Wynant off if need be."

"How many beefs yuh after?" inquired the Ranger, with the interest of an expert.

"It will run into several thousand."

"Figger one driver for every two hundred animals if it's dark. Then yuh'll need guards to lie back on the trail and keep off anybody tryin' to foller. . . . How about a market? It's best if yuh have a spot to run the cows to and get rid of 'em pronto."

"I'll take care of the market," said Vale. "This is a spot cash job on a per head basis. It's my habit to hire good men as I need them, and I always pay well. There may be more business for you later if you do this job well."

"We'll guarantee anything we make a stab at, suh."

Everything was proceeding nicely. It was Hatfield's hope to draw out Vale's full plans, then set a neatly baited trap which would snap up the enemy.

He could read the vanity in Archibald Vale, who sought power and wealth in Galveston. As Vale frowned, deep in thought, Hatfield blurted:

"Say, them are mighty purty pictures yuh got here!"

Vale was obviously flattered. He smiled, and it was plain that his opinion of the big man jumped at the expressed appreciation of his work.

"Thank you, Harvey," he murmured. "You have a soul under your rough exterior. I do my best. I wish I could retire to my studio and let the cares of the world pass by. 'I must confess mine eyes and heart, Dote less on Nature than on Art.' How I hate the strife of commerce! Yet I'm forced to protect my interests."

Archibald Vale could find excuses for any outlaw acts he might wish to order committed, thought the Ranger, who had observed this trait in many bandits. Never mind the sorrow inflicted on decent, innocent victims. The outlaw's egotism was so overweening that pity was entirely submerged.

"I'm right with yuh, Mr. Vale," he said with enthusiasm. "That is, if Horsemouth agrees, and I'm shore he will when I put it to him. Tell me the proposition."

"You know where Terryville is?" asked Vale.

"Yes suh. It's a little settlement a day's ride from here. I've worked around there."

"You can find Clifford's LC Ranch?"

"Right. It's the biggest spread in the river valley."

"A large trail herd which has been collected is at the LC," explained Vale. "I want the cattle to load my ships for Cuba. Teakettle will guide you to the herd and throw in his men with yours. You'll have a fight, I'm sure. There's a rancher up there named Major Jackson Wynant of the Double U who's made me a great deal of trouble. If he dies I'll pay a bonus for his hide." As he mentioned Wynant, Vale assumed an injured expression as though the Major had been the aggressor and Vale much put upon. "I've planned it all out. Get the herd across the bridge to the island and Riley will crush all who dare follow."

"Any idea when they aim to start their drive?" inquired Hatfield, with a business-like air.

"We're not certain of the date," Vale told him, "but it won't be far off, acording to Teakettle's report. My hunch is that Wynant and his friends will drive to New Orleans, wanting to cheat me out of my profits. It's the logical market for them unless they sell in Galveston. But they might head north for the Kansas railhead. Hurry. I can't afford to slip. This is vital."

"Yes suh." Hatfield rose briskly, saluting Vale. "I'll get to it right off. Our boys ain't far away and soon as I tell Horsemouth what's up I'll fetch 'em. Teakettle can have his bunch ready for the start to the LC. The beefs are as good as loaded in yore ships."

"Splendid! You talk like a man after my own heart."

Vale spoke expansively, plainly pleased with his new aide.

CHAPTER X

Guns In Galveston

JIM HATFIELD turned to the door, satisfied with the way matters were being brought to a head. But he swung around swiftly as he heard the Crane

Riley's sharp, nasal voice suddenly lifted in startled anger.

"Hey!" shouted Riley.

Hatfield had turned just in time to see a woman step through one of the high French windows at the rear of the studio. It was Maggie Mulcahy, red hair and all, and as pretty in her bold way as before, but flamingly angry now. The temper that had her in its grip showed in her flushed face and blazing green eyes.

"What have you done with Gerald?" she demanded stridently, facing the astonished men. "If you've killed him you'll answer for it, I swear it!"

Archibald Vale recoiled before the furious woman. He trembled and put a hand on a chair back to steady himself. Teakettle and Crane Riley froze as Maggie advanced on them threateningly.

"Get out of here," snarled Riley. "We don't savvy yore Gerald."

"You keep out of this, Riley," she yelled at the top of her sharp voice. "You dock rat! I know you. I followed that shrimp and the big one out from town. Tell me where Gerald is or I'll raise all Galveston!"

She drew a glistening hatpin and darted at Hatfield. Teakettle Jones was hissing madly.

Hatfield could guess who Gerald was. It was a bad break that Maggie should have come to Vale's. For instantly another made a shrewd guess about Gerald.

"Yuh talkin' about Horsemouth Eagen?" inquired Riley.

"Certainly I'm talking about him!" shouted Maggie. She seemed unable to speak except at the top of her voice. "I'm his fiancée, understand? You've killed him! I can't find him anywhere."

Vale was shaking violently now. Maggie had bypassed him and he was glaring at Hatfield at whom he pointed a bony finger.

"There's Eagen's partner!" cried Vale.

"Him?" scoffed Maggie. "I never saw that big galoot in my life before tonight! He went off with Gerald and I'll bet he dropped my poor boy in the bay!"

Archibald Vale instantly jumped to the right conclusion, that the tall man posing as Eagen's friend was an interloper, probably a law officer. Vale's left hand flashed under his smock. He whipped out the gun he had there with trained speed.

The Crane Riley was only one breath behind the man he served. Teakettle Jones, blocking the doorway, was only jumping up and down, letting off steam with his catfish mouth.

Guns rose to pin the Ranger.

To escape by way of the windows was out of the question. Before Hatfield could skip through one he would be drilled by Vale and Riley. Maggie Mulcahy faced him, accusing and berating him. She had wrecked his game and all he could do now was try to escape. But even in his own moment of stress he had a thought for the woman. He feared she might be killed by slugs flung recklessly.

Vale's hasty shot sang over Maggie and passed an inch from Hatfield's ducking head as the Ranger fell back, whirling for the door.

"Out of the way, woman!" screamed Vale. "Stop him, Teakettle! He's a spy."

The dwarf had no time to draw. But he lowered his head and butted into the Ranger. As the Crane's opener ripped a chunk from the hardwood paneling of the exit Hatfield sprawled on top of Jones.

Teakettle's strong hands clutched Hatfield.

"I got him, I got him!" bawled the dwarf, his hissing loud in the Ranger's ear.

Vale and Riley held their fire, since Teakettle and the fugitive were tangled in a heap on the floor. Rily darted forward, brushing Maggie Mulcahy out of the way, but not before Hatfield's desperate exertions had broken Teakettle's grip. He ripped loose and rolled on through the doorway. Scrabbling to the side, he came up on one knee and yanked out a Colt.

Heavy steps and shouts came from various parts of the mansion as Vale's servants hurried to their employer's assistance. Hatfield could not wait to get in another shot. Gasping for breath, for his wind had been knocked out by Teakettle's shaggy head, he loped for the back entrance.

THE hall seemed a mile long. There were side corridors off it but he headed for the kitchen, wanting to come out near the stables and pick up the golden sorrel. He glanced back. The Crane Riley was peering around the jamb of the studio door. The chief of the Dock-

pats was taking careful aim at him, and Hatfield let go with a shot which slapped splinters from the frame. Riley popped out of sight, his shot going wild. Hatfield could hear his startled yelps.

The door that opened onto the stable yard was not far ahead now, but two of Vale's house servants loomed before the Ranger, one carrying a double-barreled shotgun.

"Stop that man!" Vale was shrieking at the top of his voice.

The excited servants saw the tall figure coming and without warning the man with the shotgun pulled a trigger. Chunks of lead pelted the floor just in front of Hatfield and he felt the burn of a slug which sliced through his boot leather and slashed the calf of his left leg. The shock sent him reeling and he fired over the Vale retainers and staggered through an archway on his right. If they raised the shotgun a trifle and let go with the second barrel he would be riddled.

The whole place was aroused by this time. Calls and running feet seemed everywhere. With blood running into his boot the Ranger gritted his teeth and limped on. A door let him through onto a flagged terrace overlooking the Gulf, with the studio wing on the south.

The cool sea breeze fanned his burning cheeks. He swung toward the stables and had reached the turn, among ornamental shrubs and flower plots when lanterns flashed between him and the stables where he had left his mount.

"What's the matter, Maggie?" a great voice bawled.

"Pat, stop that big galoot!" Maggie Mulcahy's shrill tones replied. "Shoot his horse!"

And as a gun flamed, not directed at the Ranger, he knew that Maggie had brought along at least one aide in trailing Teakettle Jones from town.

Anger made Hatfield's blood boil. He gave a piercing whistle which would call his golden sorrel to him. Goldy would not permit others to catch him.

A stabbing beam from a big oil-burning searchlight began moving slowly about the grounds, hunting him. There were grooms at the stables with Pat, Maggie's friend. Crouched in the shrubbery, Hatfield saw Riley's lean figure run past. At the stables Riley jumped on his horse and galloped toward Galveston.

The revolver that had spoken before banged again. But Hatfield must have a horse to carry him from the trap. He kept whistling although it betrayed his position.

The searchlight swung around the south wing and its shaft played on the side of the mansion. Into the brightness trotted the golden sorrel. Those shots had missed Goldy! He had been an elusive target in the night.

"There he is!"

The troublesome beam was blinding and Hatfield could not see the wielder but he sent two shots at the core of the light. It smacked out with tinkles of breaking glass and someone, stung by Ranger lead, yelled in astonishment and pain. Flashing pistols tried for him but he was beside Goldy before aim could be centered on him. Jumping into the saddle he started north from Vale's, toward town, with the Crane Riley well ahead of him.

The only way Hatfield could get off the island was over the bridge, unless he left by boat or swam. The railroad trestle was not negotiable for a horse, and even a man on foot must move slowly across it in darkness. The southern extremes of the beach were narrow and Vale had enough influence and enough men to run him down should the Ranger turn in that direction. There were city police, of course, but Vale could kill him and dispose of him before such public forces could be brought into action.

He glanced back. Lanterns and bull's-eyes could be seen and searchers were spreading out to sweep him up. They were not far behind and Vale was urging them on.

The city was brightly lighted when Hatfield reached it, and sound of wassail came from various spots. He cut west, intending to hit the long bridge and get off the island before his pursuers could concentrate on him.

SUDDENLY he began to hear the pipings, a high note, a lower one, repeated again and again. They had an insistence which penetrated through other sounds.

"Now what does that mean?" he muttered, suspicious of any unusual manifestation.

The bosun's pipe kept it up. First it seemed to be in the heart of the city, then toward the mainland as he flashed along a road from the Strand to the bridge. From behind a low stone wall a man jumped out and fired pointblank at him but the bullet missed by inches, going wild over his head. He turned to shoot back, driving the gunslinger back to cover.

Ahead loomed the causeway which would bring him to the comparative safety of the mainland, where at least he could see to his wound and catch his breath. Lanterns on poles were strung along the causeway and by their light he saw riders and men on foot come into sight and take posts to block the bridge.

"That must be Riley signaling his Dock-rats," he decided, as the high, thin pipings persisted.

And abruptly a group of men turned the corner and cut him off even as he realized that he could not cross the causeway. The Crane Riley had his waterfront crew in action.

"Pull up, there!" a harsh voice commanded.

They were heavily armed. The Ranger whirled the golden gelding and darted back as the men fired after him.

He took the next street. The winding way led toward the Gulf shore but he found a side lane and after several snaking turns shook off the riders who were after him. His head was beginning to feel light and he knew it was from loss of blood.

Men were calling to one another all around the block. The pipings continued. Hatfield had circled so that from the alley where he now was he had a vista of the bay.

He knew this section of town, for the public corral in which he had left Goldy was not far off.

"They'll run us down shore if we keep ridin', Goldy," he murmured.

There was no escape from Galveston for them. That was plain.

He had to make a quick decision. He rode to the back of the livery stable corral. A couple of dozen horses were in there, and the building was dark.

The Ranger quickly ripped off his saddle, hung it among the others and, taking down a bar, turned Goldy in among the mustangs.

CHAPTER XI

On the Move

OVER toward the bridge approaches men were concentrating, signaled by Riley's pipes. Hatfield slid through the shadows, his left leg numb. He put a hand to a brick wall to steady himself as he scouted the waterfront street for enemies. He could see the slanted, rotting houseboat below, on the other side, where he had left Horsemouth Eagen. He had to take a chance. With hunched shoulders he lurched across to the houseboat and hopped down to the deck, landing on his right foot to keep from jarring his wounded leg.

The Ranger went through the sagging doorway, but crouched inside to see if anybody had followed him. After a time, with the dim sounds of pursuit in the salt air, he began to feel his way along the old timber.

Without light it was precarious, yet he did not want to strike a match which might betray him. He straddled the beam and worked his way along in the muddy water below, finally reaching the inner stage rimming the small cabin.

He pushed in the creaky door and crawled through, shutting it behind him. The first thing he felt was Horsemouth Eagen, who had managed to roll as far as the exit. But the rustler had been unable to rub loose the damp rawhide cords and the gag was still in place.

"How yuh doin', Horsemouth?" growled the Ranger. He had no intention of allowing Eagen to sense he was wounded and in a dangerous position.

Mumblings answered him, unintelligible, muffled by the cloth.

"We're sleepin' here, so quiet down," ordered Hatfield.

Propped in a corner, away from Horsemouth, he pulled off his left boot. The numbness was leaving the leg, the nerves beginning to throb. He bit his lip as he bandaged the calf of his leg with a strip torn from his shirt tail. He had suffered a jagged flesh wound.

Gun beside him, the officer leaned against the cabin wall and shut his eyes.

He was dozing within minutes.

Now and then he would start awake but in the darkness, but nothing developed. After several hours of alternate napping and periods of alertness, he finally saw a streak of gray light through a crack. It slowly whitened. Dawn was at hand.

But the cabin, with its boarded windows, remained gloomy. Hatfield could just make out the long figure of Eagen on the floor, and realized that the rustler's limbs must be aching and stiff from being bound.

"I'm going to ease yuh, Horsemouth," he said. "But if yuh try to act up yuh catch lead, savvy?"

He cut the strong cords and Horsemouth began rubbing his wrists and ankles.

The morning sun rose over Galveston in all its glory. Hatfield, peering through the crack in the side of the houseboat, could see up West Bay and take in a section of the long bridge which led from the isle to the Texas mainshore.

A faint thud startled him. It came from the street end of the boat. A second thud followed. He gripped his six-shooter, hammer spur back under his thumb, and he scowled in the dimness at the miserable Eagen.

"Aw, Bink," a voice said, "there's nobody in that busted old scow."

"How yuh know?" argued Bink. "The Crane said look in every hole we come to, didn't he, Whitey?"

They came to the sagging doorway.

"Here's a way in," said Whitey.

Hatfield, crouched by the door of the cabin, had a slanting view of the intruders. They wore ragged clothing—old pants and dirty shirts. Both were unshaven, and had matted hair, over which they had pulled soft hats. They were fierce-looking individuals, with long knives and pistols thrust into their belts. Members of Riley's Dockrats, without a doubt, the Ranger concluded, rascals from Galveston's lowest and worst strata.

The smaller of the two had close-set beady eyes, a sharp nose, and a quick way of moving, like the rodent he resembled. The other was stouter and his eyes were crossed. The tip of his nose was missing, the wound as yet unhealed—no doubt the mark of some mayhem committed during a fight. His shock of whitish hair stuck up through a gaping hole in his hat.

THE Dockrats were framed against the opening and only the space between the port and the cabin separated the Ranger from the manhunters. Hatfield was certain he could handle two such customers, but the ruckus would bring all his enemies upon him and in the light of day he would have slight hope of eluding them.

"Yuh can't go in there, Bink," the fat one said. "The deck's gone."

Bink, the sharp-faced one, swore and started to walk the narrow beam. But his foot slipped and one leg went down into the muddy water. He caught himself and hung by his arms, cursing in fury while Whitey jeered.

The fall discouraged Bink, who worked back to join Whitey. The two moved on, their voices drowned in the rattle of passing drays, the shouts of stevedores and the general din of the big seaport.

Hatfield resumed his stand at the crack in the side of the houseboat. Before long he saw a band of riders crossing the bridge to the mainland. Teakettle Jones, his stubby form atop a tall black gelding, was up front among the score of armed men. Hatfield recognized some of them as having been in the crew which had attacked the Double U.

They had scarcely moved past the Ranger's line of vision when a slim horseman on a beautiful gray loped past. He wore black leather and a Mexican sombrero.

"Vale!" muttered Hatfield. "Takin' the field hisself! A thousand to one they're aimin' to pick up Blackjack Finnegan's rustlers and hit Wynant!"

Hatfield knew that Archibald Vale must be well aware of the danger he was facing. Riley's Dockrats had failed to smell out the tall spy who had come so close to the Galveston bunch, so now Vale must strike quickly, without faltering, if he hoped to win.

Hatfield's left leg was stiff but the bleeding had been checked, and the shock had passed since he'd had a chance to rest. It hurt a bit to put his full weight on that leg, but a tight bandage helped and he could stand the pain. He had a Spartan ability to keep going.

Up on the waterfront he glimpsed a man in blue trousers, with a badge gleaming on his shirt front, and swinging a club —a city policeman. And there were plenty of toughs in evidence, scum who seemed to have nothing better to do than poke along the docks, as Bink and Whitey had been doing.

"Wonder could I raise enough help before Vale's hombres downed me," Hatfield was thinking, when the Crane Riley hove into his view.

Th lean chief of the Dockrats paused to speak with the constable. Money changed hands. The police officer nodded and moved along on his beat.

"Vale and Riley have me ticketed," decided the Ranger.

They could concoct any yarn they pleased about him and those watching for him would riddle him if he showed himself. He had seen only a few of the Dockrats, at that, and had no way of identifying these dangerous foes.

"But I got to warn Wynant," he muttered. "If he charges into Galveston they'll all die!"

Horsemouth Eagen, slumped in his corner, stared at the grim face of his captor, but Hatfield was not thinking of him. Only a fool would fling himself to a fruitless death. There was no escape from Galveston. . . .

Out on the Wynant spread, Betcha Steve Pittman was discovering that life held a fresh and compelling interest. Until he had arrived at the Double U and met Mimi Wynant, his had been a carefree, roving existence. He would work a season and after spending his wages in a spree, he would mosey to another ranch.

But Mimi's violet eyes and bright smile had cast a spell which Betcha had no desire to elude. He was busy with plans for the future.

"I'll save every two-bit piece I get my hands on," he thought. "Soon I'll be a foreman and I'll be makin' good money. "I'll take some pay in calves and put my own brand on 'em. That way I'll have a herd to start with when I buy my spread. And I'll do like the Major says and breed in blooded stuff so the beefs will fetch higher prices. Before you can sneeze I'll be wearin' gold spurs and a twenty-gallon hat and folks will call me Colonel. I'll be the biggest cowman in all Texas."

AS Betcha planned his metamorphosis he was on Stormcloud, his beautiful black gelding, on his way from the Double U to the LC. The range stood out against the reddening sun. Soon dark would fall and Betcha was to be one of the night shift chosen to guard the great herd collected at the LC.

Under the leadership of Major Wynant and Lew Clifford, thousands of cows had been driven to this point by owners and their men. The roomy corrals no longer could hold the herd. But the pens were used for branding and earmarking or to segregate new bunches of beefs until they could be attended to.

Wynant, Clifford, Dave Russell, Ken Ells and Rube Jeffers and several other ranchers had contributed cattle. Messages had been sent to every cattle raiser within a hundred miles concerning the Galveston situation. Many had responded by driving their marketable animals to the LC.

Clifford was the largest operator. The rest were on the Double U scale and this drive would make or break most of them. The Major in particular, since his home had been damaged by Teakettle Jones and his rowdies, needed what he could realize from the sale in order to keep going. The war had wrecked many a fortune and Wynant had just been getting a fresh start when Archibald Vale had seized the nearest market, Galveston. Delay after delay had squeezed the ranchers, so there must be no slip-up in the drive now.

There were about fifty men at Clifford's, counting the owners, and many had brought along their women folk to cook for them and see to their comfort. Wynant had closed his home after Teakettle's visit, but others had left crews to run things until the return from the drive to New Orleans.

Betcha knew the importance of guarding the herd before the start of the drive, in common with the other cowboys. There was a tense, earnest atmosphere at the LC when the night shift rode out.

Guarding the herd with Betcha were a dozen other riders, posted at strategic points. As Betcha took his own allotted place, he could see them all, but soon it would be night and he would have to move back and forth, crooning a bit so that he would not alarm the steers. He had done plenty of night herding and

knew all the tricks.

The punishment he had taken at the Double U, when Teakettle Jones had caught him, had laid him up for a couple of days. But the tall Ranger had snatched him from the enemy's hands before he had been seriously injured. Youth and strength had quickly brought recovery, although Betcha's good-humored face still showed bruises and cuts, and his neck hurt when he turned his head.

Betcha sat his saddle facing the assembled beefs. Most of them were longhorns, but some fatter creatures had been thrown in by Wynant, who believed in blooded stock and breeding for meat instead of in the old method of letting cows run wild. The grass had been eaten for a couple of miles around and soon the animals would grow too restless to be held.

"We ought to start day after tomorrer," thought Betcha. "The herd's ready."

Bunches of cattle stood in the shallows of the river, drinking and slowly lashing their tails in a fruitless effort to drive off hosts of flies and other annoying insects. Betcha couldn't blame them as he brushed a mosquito from his cheek, careful not to slap and make a sound which might startle his bovine charges.

The sun dropped below the horizon and for a short time there was a purplish glow over the world. But soon this, too, went out and Betcha saw the first stars of the evening.

CHAPTER XII

Stolen Herd

SLOWLY Betcha began riding circle. When he heard another rider coming he pulled up. It was Quint Vernon, a young LC waddy with whom Betcha had been friendly since he had come to Clifford's. There had grown up an easy camaraderie between Betcha and the lean Quint, who was quick with a jest.

"How's it goin', Quint?" sang out Betcha.

"Great! I get so excited night herdin', with the moon, the stars and the beautiful women. Funny, though, but they all look like cows." His white teeth flashed. "Got the makin's?"

They rolled smokes and lighted up before separating.

The hours dragged along. The night shift had a small fire going and a couple of big soot-stained coffee pots on the grill so that a rider could pause for a warm drink now and then.

A yellow glow on the edge of the world showed that the chunk of moon due to rise was on schedule. Betcha was glad it was on its way, for it would offer a little light. He could hear the stirrings of the great herd and the low crooning of the riders, but otherwise there was the silence of the wilds.

By ten o'clock all the lights in the ranchhouse were out. The only light left was a lantern, burning in the yard. Night closed down in earnest.

By midnight Betcha was slumped in his saddle, yawning again and again. It was a warm night and the sky was clear save for a vagueness low in the east, in the direction of the Gulf. The chunk of moon was up and Betcha could distinguish clumps of the cattle, most of them on their feet and hunting for grass in the already grazed-over area.

An owl hooted persistently and another replied on the far side of the herd, down by the river. Betcha heard it sleepily.

A breath later the world seemed to explode into action. Betcha was instantly awake, aware of blazing guns, and of shouting attackers boring in from the west, between the buildings and the herd.

"Them cows'll stampede shore!" thought Betcha.

Already big longhorn leaders had lowered their heads and raised their tails, starting away from the flaming stabs of weapons, the sharp, alarming sounds of the marauders.

"Hey, Betcha!" Quint Vernon was bawling at him.

Betcha pulled a Colt and whirled Stormcloud, pushing along to join Quint. Vernon was waiting for him, yelling to him to hurry. Both realized that the cows would quickly move upon them, drive them along in the crush.

"Make for the river!" cried Betcha.

They rode full-tilt for the river bank, behind them a low thunder shaking the earth as thousands of hoofs picked up the beat of the stampede. Quint tore along,

Betcha at his heels, angling off as lowered sharp horns threatened them. A slip would send a waddy hurtling to death under crushing tons of cattle.

In an ordinary stampede the drovers would have run alongside the steers and when the animals had tired a bit the men would have tried to head off the leaders and circle the herd, to stop the crazy run. But this was different. This was panic, induced by the crew which had struck in the night.

"I'll betcha it's Teakettle's band!" shouted Pittman. "Watch yoreself, Quint! They're killers!"

The main herd rumbled past as they reached the lower ground by the river. Quint was in front as they bumped into the left wing of the attackers, dark figures tearing along on fast mustangs. The rustlers were shooting over the cattle, whooping it up as the speed increased. In various spots spasmodic gunfire showed that cowboys were putting up a fight.

"Cut it out!" bawled Quint.

"Hold back, Quint!" warned Betcha, raising his Colt.

Guns swung their way and bullets whirled in the air. Quint Vernon sailed off his horse and landed hard, his head doubled under one arm. A dozen steers ran over him a breath later and Betcha fired in fury at the enemies who had shot his friend.

But Stormcloud did not like the menacing sharp horns and blazing guns. He danced away, fighting his bit. Betcha made at least one hit, for a rider screeched and doubled up, gripping his saddle-horn as he galloped on in the crush.

A BURST of powder made it possible for Pittman to recognize one of the thieves, a stubby, broad figure with a bristling beard—Teakettle Jones. With him was a big fellow in a black Stetson and leather, and with a pock-marked face. But even as Betcha tried to fire at the men masses of cows cut him off. The dust rose thick to blind the eyes of the men trying to check the run.

The dust also saved Betcha, for it screened him from the rustlers. He kept shooting blindly in the hope of making a hit, and yelled to the other cowboys who had been shunted aside, but without effect. The earth shook with galloping hoofs and within a few minutes the herd had passed Betcha and were being hastened on pell-mell by rustlers.

Pittman found Quint, but there was nothing he or anyone else could do. The cowboy was dead. Hoofs had cut him up.

Betcha carried the body off to a quiet spot and left it. Remounting, he sought the others of the night shift.

Lights had quickly flickered into being in the house and now men were running to the scene of the disaster. Several of the night herders had collected to take hasty stock before pursuit began. Betcha was among them. At least two cowboys had died, and four others had been slashed by flying lead. All the survivors agreed that the rustlers had struck in overwhelming force, the odds six or seven to one.

"We better call the Major and Mr. Clifford," said Betcha. "We got to chase the cusses."

Major Wynant, Lew Clifford and other searchers already had hastily saddled up. They came galloping out to meet the night shift.

"It was Teakettle Jones, Major!" shouted Betcha. "I seen him as he flashed by!"

"And Vale behind it all," snapped Wynant. "Let's get goin' boys. Every man carry spare ammunition, a six-shooter, and either a carbine or shotgun. Hustle! I'm shore they'll head for the coast. Vale can't get away with this."

Wynant organized the chase with a trained military officer's precision. But precious time had to be consumed before a start could be made, no matter how quickly they mobilized. The herd was out of sight and hearing when they set out on the trail.

The dust in the air led them along the river road. Two miles from the bedding grounds they ran into the rear guard of the rustlers. Spitting rifles opened on them as Wynant and other leaders rounded a bend.

"To the sides, boys!" shouted the Major. "Let 'em have it!"

Betcha was near the Major as the cowmen hastily sought cover and sent answering fire at the spots from which they saw enemy guns flame. More and more of Wynant's forces pushed up and drove the rustlers on. The rear guard who had

been left to stop pursuit had been vanquished.

Wynant put two volunteers out front, for it would not do to ride into an ambush while all the time the herd was being driven full-tilt away. After another mile hidden marksmen slashed once more at the pursuers. It was nip-and-tuck as the infuriated ranchers tried to smash through. Riders were forced to dismount and work a slow way around to dislodge the drygulchers.

"We'll get 'em," promised Wynant grimly. "Wait till it's light."

They passed the dark and deserted Double U. Again bullets raged at them when they made another bend in the river road. Wynant's scouts came pelting back and the Major had to dismount his men. This time it took half an hour to rout the outlaws, for a bluff projected over the highway and the rustlers had hastily shoved down big boulders to block the pursuing cattlemen. Behind this barricade the cattle thieves crouched and held Wynant's forces. And each delay meant that the herd had drawn farther off.

IT was still dark when they skirted Terryville. The country opened up and the thieves could choose any point of the compass in which to drive the stolen herd. The wind blew dust across the range so that it was no longer an indication of moving cattle.

Wynant paused to confer with his friends, for there was a difference of opinion as to which way the enemy had gone. To the south, however, carbines challenged them, spitting fire and lead in an invitation to battle.

"Let's go after 'em!" cried Dave Russell.

Betcha waited to hear what the Major would say.

"Boys," Wynant pointed out, "they'll run our cows to the Gulf, which lies eastward. Vale wants to load his schooners and even if we don't overtake the herd between here and Galveston we can stop him there. They're tryin' to draw us off. Mebbe they've split off a few beefs from the main body to fool us into turnin' south, but I say we ought to push on to Galveston."

In their hot anger at the rustlers, the ranchers failed to realize that they were reacting as Archibald Vale had foreseen they would, and that they were being remorsely led into a death trap!

CHAPTER XIII

Through the Fog

EXILED in the ramshackle boathouse off the Galveston waterfront, Jim Hatfield breathed a sigh of relief. At last night had fallen. He had watched for a break which would permit him to desert the houseboat, but none had come.

Several times he had spied the Crane Riley, and a number of skulking but alert characters he decided were Dockrats. The bridge and the railway trestle were under guard and he was sure that boats starting across West Bay would also be checked.

It had been like an oven in the confined cabin. As the sun had risen it had been obscured by a haze which acted as a burning-glass, magnifying the rays. The Ranger and Eagen had no drinking water and both had suffered acutely through dragging hours. On Horsemouth's pledge not to call out, Hatfield had removed the gag. The rustler was well aware, however, that an attempt to betray the Texas Ranger would mean instant death.

Hatfield's leg ached, but the wound seemed to be doing well enough. He kept a bandage on it and, while he limped, the injury had not immobilized him.

Acquainted with the weather along the Gulf coast, the Ranger had eagerly awaited sundown, thankful that the haze persisted. Toward evening a damp wind sprang up and rolling white clouds drifted in from the sea, enveloping Galveston island and West Bay.

"Fog!" exulted the Ranger. "I told yuh it would come."

Everything soon grew wet and sticky from the pervading mist. Darkness made it as black as ink inside the cabin and Hatfield stood ready in case Eagen should have any bright ideas of launching a desperate attack. But the rustler chief was completely tamed and made no move against his captor.

"Can't we go out now, Ranger?" he begged.

"In a jiffy," Hatfield told him. "There's a rowboat right at the next dock that's got oars in it. I spotted it this afternoon."

Hatfield eased around the wall and looked through the crack. The nearest street lamp looked like the yolk of an egg and even as he watched, a thicker cloud drifted in and shut it off completely.

"Let's go, Horsemouth." Hatfield said, and quietly opened the sagging door. "Feel yore way along that beam," he ordered. "If yuh yell or try to duck off I'll sieve yuh, savvy?"

Eagen started to cross the beam. His foot slipped as Bink's had done and there was a splash and the suck of mud. Horsemouth swore in a dispirited manner.

"Shut up!" snarled the Ranger.

Eagen got back on the narraw walk and reached the outer door, Hatfield moving with a cat's precision behind him. The mist was over everything and they could see but a few feet around them. But the Ranger had marked the position of the little dory before dark had fallen, and could move straight to it.

Gun in hand, and with Eagen just ahead, Hatfield went quickly along the stringpiece and out on the small float. The rowboat was still tied there, oars in the locks.

"Yore turn to row, Horsemouth," said Hatfield, undoing the painter.

Under the cocked gun Horsemouth Eagen took the middle seat and placed the oars in the locks. Hatfield sat in the stern, facing his prisoner. Vague sounds came from around them through the fog that was thick as pea soup.

"I can't see a thing," protested the rustler.

"I can see you," drawled the Ranger. "Row."

The cow thief was inexpert at the job and as he pulled, the craft seemed to move in circles. Once they bumped into an anchored fishing boat and someone aboard, startled, ran on deck and cursed them roundly.

"Keep workin" commanded the Ranger.

It was impossible for them to tell their position since the fog completely hid Galveston. A big horn kept sounding frog-throated warnings.

"It's no use," whimpered Eagen, drooping over the oars, and panting. "We ain't gettin' anywhere and how do we know if we do?"

A faint rumbling attracted Hatfield. "Pull on yore right, Eagen."

HORSEMOUTH resumed his labors and soon they realized that the rumbling was made by horses crossing the bridge. A faint gleam of light told Hatfield where they were.

"We're near the causeway to the mainland," he said. "We'll foller the string of lights. Row, cuss yuh."

The splashings Eagen made, the creak of the wooden tholepins, might be audible but the mist covered the rowboat and it would distort noises.

It was two miles across the bay and by the time they had reached the halfway mark Horsemouth Eagen was dripping with sweat and gasping for wind.

"My hands are all blistered, Ranger," he groaned. "I ain't used to this."

"Row on."

With the long bridge as a guide, Hatfield aimed at the mainland. Every pull on the oars now brought a groan from the suffering Eagen.

The tide was out and with the dank fog came the odor of mudflats. Soon Eagen found a channel, and Hatfield decided they had reached the shore beyond the causeway and that they had left Galveston behind them.

Also, behind him, the Ranger thought bitterly, Vale held Galveston in his tightening grip. Each triumph brought him closer to final victory.

"I'll be back," murmured Hatfield, turned for a moment toward the blanketed isle.

The mud was knee-deep as he and Eagen waded through marshes choked by high reeds, until they came out on the bayou road, and moved inland. There were plantations along the way and when the Ranger sighted a low white house at the side of the road he turned toward it.

The place was dark but persistent knocking brought the owner. Hatfield's story of being a sheriff who had captured an escaped prisoner and then been lost in the fog, was accepted without question. For a price the planter would supply him with a good horse. He gave them water, slices of cold meat and bread.

After eating, the rustler was glad to throw himself down on the dirt floor of

a shack with a barred door and window. Instantly sleep claimed the weary Eagen.

But there was no rest for the Ranger. Limping, he saddled the rangy bay gelding he had rented from the planter and rode from the coast. . . .

Dawn was just breaking when Hatfield sighted the big herd coming his way. A fresh west wind had sprung up in his face with the new day and had dissipated the fog, but, dust rolled thick over the road for miles.

The Ranger drew off and hid himself and the bay on a mound covered with brush and low trees. He could not afford to take chances. Too much depended on his staying alive. Major Wynant, Betcha Pittman, Clifford and the rest would run straight into Vale's deadly embrace if they were not warned.

A couple of point riders, one of whom Hatfield recognized as being a Teakettle Jones man, came trotting along the pike in the van of the great herd. More riders were strung along the flanks, some of them strangers to Hatfield, others more of Teakettle's crew.

The steers moved at a slow trot but they were wet and weary from the hard run. The drovers had kept them running as much as possible. Strays would swing off but alert horsemen would turn them back.

Hatfield watched the long lines of cattle, worth a fortune delivered on the hoof in Cuba. He knew what this meant to Vale, poised for his leap to the topmost pinnacle of the outlaw world, full control of Galveston's valuable industry. Vale already had power and influence to shunt off weaker, decent folks who might bring legal charges against him. He was ruthless and ready to go to any lengths.

There were perhaps a score of rustlers driving the herd, but Hatfield did not see Teakettle Jones.

"Vale must have enlisted Blackjack Finnegan," the Ranger decided.

Jones could have picked up Finnegan and his rustlers at the Brazos Bottoms, en route to the LC, then struck the ranchers and seized the herd.

THE sun had risen high enough to turn yellow before the stolen cows had passed the hidden Ranger. Drag riders urged the stragglers along and dust rolled on for the Gulf, toward the waiting maws of Vale's ships. Once in Galveston it would not be easy to wrest the herd from the rustlers.

"Wynant must be chasin' 'em!" muttered Hatfield.

That must be why he had not seen Teakettle Jones. Teakettle, "Blackjack" Finnegan and the main crew must be coming, too. There was a possibility that the cow thieves had lured Wynant and his friends into ambush and destroyed them.

The breeze was slowly clearing the dust from the road. After a time, from his high point, the Ranger caught the glint of the sun on metal. Riders came slowly up the grade and topped the rise.

One of them was the dwarfish Teakettle in leather, and with a wide hat pulled low on his frowsy head. His corncob pipe was stuck at a sharp angle in his catfish mouth. An outlaw in black chaps, shirt and dark Stetson followed Teakettle. The man's evil face was pockmarked.

"Blackjack Finnegan!" the Ranger thought.

[*Turn page*]

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Bunches of the rustlers broke into his range of vision then. They were hard-looking men, with chin straps taut, unshaven and wearing dirty clothing, but heavily armed with Colts, carbines and shotguns. Hatfield counted over fifty of them.

Then he heard distant gunshots. Teakettle Jones and Blackjack Finnegan sang out orders. Not far ahead was a bend in the road and rocks and bushes for concealment. Quickly marksmen disposed themselves, the horse holders retiring a short distance with the sweated mustangs.

Hatfield could see several of the prostrate killers. He had only his Colts with him for his carbine was attached to the saddle he had left in the barn in Galveston when he had turned Goldy into the corral.

Silence descended save for occasional shots from the west. Then after a half-hour horsemen hove into sight. They were shooting back at pursuers with carbines. As the rear guard of the band arrived, Teakettle and Finnegan signaled them on.

Far behind straggled Wynant's party. The Major, then the huge Betcha Pittman topped the rise. Back of them were ranchers and cowboys the Ranger had met at the Double U and LC.

"They shore look haggard," he muttered.

Their horses were lathered and moving in the fatigued and dispirited manner of animals near their last gasp. The men had the same drooping aspect. So had the rustlers, but Galveston lay not far away and there the thieves would find strong, fresh reinforcements whereas the cowmen would be finished.

With Wynant and Betcha in the lead, the dispirited ranchers kept coming, nearer and nearer to the spot where Teakettle and his gunslingers were set for the kill.

Hatfield raised his pistol. He chose the most inviting target, a long-bodied cow thief lying at a slant to the road, his booted legs spread and an elbow on the ground under his carbine as he drew a careful bead on Betcha Pittman.

The Ranger Colt rapped its sharp warning. It brought immediate results.

Betcha pulled his rein and Stormcloud veered and bounded off to the side, while Hatfield saw his revolver slug kick up turf twenty yards short of the mark. But it must have ricocheted and sung close to the rustler, whose carbine crackled. But Betcha was already moving and so was Wynant.

The pursuers took cover with admirable speed, as Teakettle's crew opened in full fury. But by that time the riders were down and had taken cover.

A mustang began screeching, slashed by a stray bullet. The battle was on.

CHAPTER XIV

Warning

MAJOR Wynant, Betcha and the rest of the embattled ranchers were hugging the dirt and shooting at the bushes from which came flashes of flames. Hatfield fired rapidly with his pistols, and it was not long until the rustlers became aware of the fact that someone had entered the fight from a different direction. Answering lead ripped the trees on the mound, but with their element of surprise spoiled the cattle thieves were glad to beat a retreat. A man sang out an order, and other men jumped up and rushed to the waiting horses, heading toward Galveston at a gallop. Dust hung over the road and mustang hoofs beat more into the heated air.

As the outlaws pulled away Major Wynant stood up and signaled his men. They collected in the ditch, staring after the enemy, keeping a sharp lookout. Hatfield sent three shots into the sky to draw their attention. When they heard the explosion they hastily dropped down again.

The Ranger waved his Stetson. He led out the bay, mounted and moved toward the cattlemen, riding in arcs to signal them. Soon they recognized him and he joined them on the highway.

"Hatfield! We've lost our big herd and we're all slashed up!" Major Wynant had shouted out the officer's real name, forgetting for the moment the Ranger's incognito. But it made no difference, for now on the tall man's shirt was pinned the silver star on silver circle, emblem of the Texas Rangers.

Wynant was in distress. His face was

gaunt and under his tan showed the pallor of utter fatigue. His eyes were red from grit and lack of sleep, his clothing plastered with dried mud and torn by thorns.

Betcha Pittman showed the same signs of weariness, as did the other ranchers and their cowboys.

"We've given ground all the way," Wynant went on, biting his cracked lip. "Lew Clifford and several older men had to drop behind, and half a dozen of the boys were hit by flying lead. Ten mustangs have been killed."

The pace had been too fast, the resistance of the rustlers too vicious for the pursuers to pause for needed sleep or to collect reinforcements from the law.

Defeated men sought the Ranger's cool, gray-green eyes, hunting encouragement. All knew the significance of that star. His rugged features were set and his easy bearing showed his inner strength. Fresh hope roused in them in his presence, as his soft voice told them what they must do.

"Slow down. Yuh're not in shape to fight a hard battle. Yuh need sleep and food and so do yore mounts."

"But they'll have the herd in Galveston in a few more hours," objected Major Wynant. "We'll have trouble identifyin' our cows if they're split up and mebbe hidden or loaded in ships. Of course we can ask the Galveston police for aid, but I'm not countin' much on that."

"I'll see to everything," Hatfield promised. "This way yuh'll run into a death trap, all set for yuh by Vale. If yuh plunge on blind there won't be any of yuh left to complain to the authorities."

"Have yuh got a plan?" asked the troubled Major.

Hatfield nodded, squatting before them as they snatched a few minutes of rest, sprawled or sitting at the side of the road.

The Ranger gave his orders and instructions and they listened carefully, gravely, aware that their only chance lay in his power to bring victory out of defeat.

Assured that they would take his advice, Hatfield left them and set out on the lone ride to the coast. As he finally neared the town, over his shoulder the sun was nearing the horizon. Galveston was ahead, bathed in a glorious light. The Gulf was indigo, touched here and there by whitecaps and skimmed by low-flying marine birds. The bayous, arms of the sea, and brackish swamps thrust inland, while rice and suger plantations spread from the shores.

BECAUSE of rustlers on the roads Hatfield had had to cut cross country, skirting cypress groves and snake-ridden marshes, picking a way as he could. He had reached the planter's and there had traded the fagged bay for a chestnut gelding. Goldy was on the isle, and Hatfield hoped soon to rejoin his equine comrade in his desperate effort to stop Vale. He had enjoyed a snack at the home of the planter where Horsemouth Eagen still languished in the little lockup.

The planter had known what the Ranger star stood for and had offered all assistance he could. He had described paths and lanes which would take Hatfield close to the Galveston bridge so that the officer would not be forced out on enemy-infested highways radiating from the causeway approach.

Hurrying on, but ever wary, Hatfield scouted the route. So far Archibald Vale had held the upper hand save for Ranger counters in the dangerous game. On one hand loomed Vale, hundreds of helpers at his disposal, influence, wealth, and the advantages of position. On the other Hatfield fought alone save for a handful of battered cowmen. But, as always, in his heart was a strong faith in the powers of right over might.

There were few high points near the shore. At one of them Hatfield drew up behind woods festooned with Spanish moss. When he dismounted his feet sank in black muck as he sought a vantage point.

By climbing to the crotch of a tree he could see the bridge with roads leading to it. Long lines of cattle crowded the causeway for as far as he could see. The rumble of hoofs over the wooden sections made a low thunder.

Such a herd would have right-of-way over other traffic and drawn up waiting to cross, were wagons and horsemen. Crane Riley was bossing operations and near the Dockrat chief stood the stubby Teakettle Jones. Armed men lounged about Riley.

The road from the west ran south of

the grove and a bunch of riders there filed into the picture, passing the wooded area in which Hatfield was hiding. The dusty horsemen were Blackjack Finnegan's fighters, pulling in after the most recent battle in the road.

Teakettle jumped on his mustang and galloped to meet them. He spoke to Finnegan, who nodded and signaled with a bony arm. His boys trailed him into a side lane, where they dismounted and threw themselves on the ground to rest.

Riley had watchers out for the cattlemen, and also for the elusive "spy" he had been unable to catch. But his main job for the moment was pushing the herd through to Vale's waiting ships.

"I've got to hustle," thought Hatfield, and it was a larger order he set for himself. He must invade Galveston and whip up sufficient resistance to break Vale.

But right now he was blocked. It would be hours before he could find a boat and make the slow trip across West Bay, and it must then be in the night. The bridge and spidery railroad trestle would be constantly under Crane Riley's guns, and to show himself would mean instant death.

Hatfield left his perch, thinking over the possibilities. Time was a most vital factor. Even if he could reach the city police of Galveston and convince the heads of the force of the seriousness of the situation, they had not the strength on the island to overwhelm the enemy. Vale had no doubt thought of this, anyhow and taken steps to counteract any complaints that might be made to the authorities. If worst came to worst Vale might cover himself by claiming he had bought the herd in good faith. The rustlers could be blamed for everything, and Vale had the wealth and position to fight such accusations. And of course once loaded on ships, and with anchors up for Cuba, the vanished herd would not be evidence against him.

"I'm goin' in," muttered Hatfield, and began hunting a path across the swamp toward the highway along which the rustlers had just come.

He had to skirt dank pools fringed by long streamers of Spanish moss hanging from stubby trees, and dense thickets. Clumps of grass sticking up helped and he was able to reach the other side of the swamp but he was soaked, and muddy to his thighs.

IT WAS drier where the road had been raised and he worked along until he could no longer see the bridge. He squatted down then where he could not be seen, getting his breath and waiting.

A couple of toughs, with heavy beards and fierce eyes, came along. They were stragglers from Finnegan's band, and the horse one of them rode was lame. A slow farm wagon driven by a young Negro creaked past but it was empty and Hatfield remained hidden.

It was half an hour before he saw his opportunity. He must chance it—anything to reach Galveston. His chance was a high-wheeled cart with a load of loose sugar cane piled in the body and overhanging its slatted sides which appeared and slowly approached the spot where Hatfield crouched. A sleepy mule drew it. A venerable Negro in patched garments, and a straw hat was drooped over the reins. There were no other vehicles or riders in sight. Hatfield spoke a sharp order.

"Uncle! Pull up and come here."

The old fellow jumped and turned his face toward the voice. He seemed about to whip up but Hatfield's voice soothed him.

"I'm not a holdup. I need help. I'll pay yuh well."

The driver stopped the mule, got down, and came toward Hatfield. The Ranger rose, towering over him.

"Howdy, Uncle. I want to get into Galveston, savvy? And I want yuh to hide me under that cane and keep shut while we're crossin' the bridge. I got enemies."

"Yuh afeared of the police?" the old man quavered.

"No. See this." Hatfield tapped his star.

"A Texas Ranger, suh!"

"Yuh're not afraid, are yuh?" asked Hatfield.

The old man shook his head and grinned. "Suh, I went all through the war, cookin' at the front lines. I'm too far along to be scared of anything much. Come on. I'll drive yuh to Galveston."

Quickly Hatfield crossed to the cart and burrowed into the cane. Uncle walked around the load with a critical eye, arranging it here and there so that the hid-

den man could not be spied from any angle. Through a narrow vista in the stalks and leaves of the fragrant cane the Ranger could watch the sides of the road.

Uncle climbed up on the cart.

"Giddap, there! Come on, yuh Ronald!"

Uncle slapped the mule's haunches with the reins and the cart creaked on.

They rounded a bend and moved toward the congestion at the bridgehead. Crane Riley, wearing guns strapped to his thighs, came up and seized the mule's bridle, stopping the cart.

"Yuh'll have to wait till the herd crosses the bridge, yuh old goat," he ordered.

"Yes suh."

Uncle pulled off to one side and Hatfield lay quiet under the sugar cane, watching the operations. Expert hands moved the stolen cattle to the bridge and eased them onto the island, two miles away. More dust was in the air, the crack of whips, and low voices of men chatting together as they killed time while the cows held the causeway.

Within a few yards of him were many enemies and Hatfield had only his Colts. If Riley or any of his crew happened to poke into Uncle's load of cane there would be no chance for the Ranger to escape.

It was tense waiting for all the cattle to cross the bridge. Half-smothered, Hatfield gritted his teeth and held on. The heat was frightful for the breeze from the water was cut off by thick brush and lack of motion.

Sundown had come when the last bunches of cows were started across. A score of horsemen and many vehicles were piled up, impatient to get to Galveston. Riley began to let them through a few hundred yards behind the drag of the herd.

Hatfield passed within a yard of the Crane. Through his peephole he studied the hard-bitten face of Vale's Galveston lieutenant. The long nose of the thin, close-shaven Riley twitched. He was wearing sailor pants and shoes, a thin white jersey, and a cartridge belt holding two pistols and a knife. A tropical helmet shielded his deep-sunk green eyes from the sun.

Hatfield had a close look at Riley and what he saw rather surprised him. The Crane seemed apprehensive, and a raucous shout from down the road made him start and turn quickly, hand flying to a pistol butt.

"He acts shaky," decided the Ranger. "Mebbe he ain't as tough as he makes out to be."

The long nose twitched again as Riley saw that the noise that had startled him had been made by a youth in a buggy, yelling to a friend on the way to Galveston. There were Dockrats slouching around at Riley's beck and call, plenty of help if the chief needed it, so it must be the strain that was eating away at the Crane's nerve.

The cart slanted on the approach to the bridge. Soon the wheels ground on crushed seashells and moved across the span.

There was no drawing back now even had Hatfield so wished. Alone, the Ranger was pushing back to Galveston to win or die.

CHAPTER XV

Alone

IT WAS a little cooler on the move, for sea breeze had a full sweep through the slats of the high-wheeled cart. Creaking of wheels, the drum of hoofs, the calls of mankind, the screeching of wheeling gulls, came to the Ranger, hidden under the rustling sugar cane.

He had a restricted view from either side. On the water side the rippled waves of West Bay showed, with small craft anchored in the shelter of the long island. The minutes dragged as the slow progress continued. At last new sounds, those of the big port in operation, competed for attention with the smaller noises. Stevedores shouted, winches and derricks screamed and whined.

Just north of the Galveston end of the bridge stood the dismantled fortifications which had been in use during the Civil War. Both North and South had held the city and island at one time or another. Cannon and such military machines and materials had been confiscated by the victors but the breastworks remained, with gaping embrasures commanding the

bridge. As the sun scintillated on metal the Ranger hitched around for a better view through the cane. He saw the peak of a black hat, then a second man bobbed up and peered through an opening. The long barrels of their rifles had reflected the light.

"Uncle!" called Hatfield softly.

"Yes, suh." Uncle's voice was calm and he did not seem worried by the dangerous work in which he was engaged.

"Yuh're higher up than I am. How many can yuh count in the old fort?"

"Both hands twice," the old driver reported after a while. "But I reckon there's others I can't see. They keep poppin' up and down like jumpin'-jacks in there."

Hatfield was sure these were more of Riley's crew, under Vale's command. The rustlers were lurking on the main shore to stop Wynant and if he and his men had tried to rush the bridge his forces would have been crushed, shot down by marksmen in the forts.

"I'm shore glad I got a-holt of Wynant when I did," thought the Ranger.

So Vale had gone all the way in his plan to crush those who had dared rebel against his dictates. And once the Cuban deal was completed, and that fortune in hand, Vale could turn his attention to bigger matters, the control of Galveston's wharfage and shipping.

Uncle swung off the island ramp and onto a cobbled street, the cart rattling along as the old driver urged the sleepy mule on.

"Where yuh want me to run yuh in town, suh?" the Negro asked, in a low voice.

"S'pose yuh take me for a drive along the Strand first off," Hatfield said.

The wide main street was crowded with people, animals and vehicles. Now and again Uncle would draw up to let the Ranger observe the bustling waterfront.

The stolen cattle, he saw, had been shunted into long, narrow pens leading to piers. Schooners were tied to the docks with gates opening through chutes into the ships. On each bridge stood the captain and mate, supervising the work, while another officer signaled the drivers as he watched through the hatch to see how the animals packed in. Steers bellowed and plunged, but the crush from behind kept them going. Whips cracked, stevedores cursed and there was general confusion.

Archibald Vale, in elegant tropical clothing and expensive boots came riding past. He was engrossed in the loading for Cuba, and in his expression was triumph and satisfaction. His ships were being filled. He had won! It meant the means to expand his grip on Galveston and the commercial empire he coveted.

The big herd had jammed traffic but Galveston was cheerful about such things, for it was on this and similar business that the port thrived. Horsemen and wagons had taken to side streets or waited until the congestion abated and the thousands of big steers separated into smaller, more manageable groups in wharf pens. Such facilities cost money. Vale had chartered a fleet of schooners he planned to bring him that money, but he wanted more. He had a burning desire to control the lion's share of Galveston's commerce.

"If he ain't brought up short the cuss will make it, too," thought the grim Ranger.

OTHER men before Vale had won greater empires than this city and its commerce by the ruthless methods he was employing. Seizure of certain key factors would give him what he wanted. His plans had been completed and he was putting them into operation—and it seemed a difficult task to stop him now.

Hatfield studied the man as Archibald Vale drew up near for a minute. The sea breeze touched the silken cloak flung over his bony shoulders. The Ranger sighted the stock of a large Navy revolver, its handle inlaid with gold filigree, stuck in Vale's wide sash.

Vale pushed his mettled black Arab on up the Strand and the cart rolled slowly on south.

"Most of the Dockrats must be out at that fort, watchin' for Wynant to cross the bridge," decided Hatfield.

He had a sense of being pressed, that perhaps a few hours might mean the difference between victory and defeat.

"Uncle," he called "I want to go to a cottage on the bay, south of the city." He described the place.

Dark was at hand by now. But men would work all night loading Vale's ships. Lanterns and searchlights were already

being lighted to illuminate the piers.

Uncle drove on, and finally brought the cart to a halt in Jake Silver's side yard. The kitchen door stood open and, making sure the coast was clear, the Ranger left his hiding place in the sugar cane and went over the side of the cart, dropping to the warm, sandy ground.

"Wait for me, Uncle," he murmured.

"Yes, suh."

Uncle grinned at him and reached for a plug of black tobacco. He bit off a "chaw" and slumped over his reins. Ronald, the mule, was already deep in slumber.

Hatfield rapped on the door and stepped into Jake Silver's kitchen. The former cattle dealer was standing in front of his stove, cooking a meal. He started and turned at the knock and the soft tread of the tall man. Silver's sharp blue eyes fixed Hatfield, who was plastered with bayou mud and sugar cane chaff. Silver did not recognize him until the Ranger spoke.

"I'm back in Galveston, Mr. Silver."

"Ranger Hatfield! I wouldn't have known yuh. What's happened?" Silver hurried to shut the door, apprehension in his lined face. "I've heard a bunch of rumors. From what I gathered in town Vale got the jump on yuh. He's talked the city police into huntin' for yuh as a desperate outlaw. Yuh're said to be posin' as a law officer. And did yuh know that a big herd crossed the bridge to the island this afternoon? It belongs to Vale, and his ships are bein' loaded for Cuba."

"I'm here to scotch Vale," Hatfield said quietly. "Actually that herd belongs to a group of ranchers from the Terryville section—Major Jackson Wynant, Lew Clifford and some others. Vale hired a bunch of rustlers headed by an outlaw called Blackjack Finnegan and, along with Teakettle Jones and his lobos, they snatched the cows. Wynant's not far from Galveston and means to make a showdown out of it. He has about forty fightin' men with him."

Jake Silver shook his head. "That ain't enough, Ranger. We cattle buyers are willin' to jump in and go for Vale too, but the way things stand now we'd be massacreed, and Wynant and his friends along with us."

"If Vale gets his toehold on Galveston it's all over but the shoutin'," declared the Ranger. "How about the dock operators yuh spoke of? Will they throw in with us? This is important to them as well as to the ranchers. Vale has plans to win full command of Galveston's shippin' and piers."

"I believe yuh," replied Silver earnestly. "And my pards would, too, for Vale put the screws on them. But after yore first visit I sounded out Banford Norton, who owns a string of docks here, and I talked with several others, careful-like, of course. They're decent fellers, but they're busy and thinkin' of their own concerns. It's human nature not to get excited over somethin' that hasn't touched yuh. Norton and the rest asked me for some sort of proof that Vale aims to wreck 'em and grab their properties. 'Course I couldn't give it. If you could convince 'em they would band together and fight Vale. But just talkin' won't fetch 'em."

"I savvy."

HATFIELD pondered the matter. Desperate situations demanded desperate remedies. Wynant, Clifford, the cattlemen he had come to assist would be in dire peril when Vale caught up with them. The black shadow of the man loomed over Galveston, with fresh victims who would fall like ripe plums as Vale's reinforced hand shook the tree.

But what Jake Silver had said was true. It was hard to drive men to drastic action unless they felt themselves and their immediate interests jeopardized.

The Ranger sensed the gathering force of Archibald Vale, who had a faculty for enlisting the worst elements as he required them. Such outlaws as Crane Riley, Teakettle Jones, and Blackjack Finnegan, willingly gave him their allegiance. It was for a monetary price, of course, but also because they realized that Vale would be their ally and protector.

"I'll bet Horsemouth Eagen would have thrown in with him if I'd given that rustler a chance," mused Hatfield. "Vale's like a magnet of evil, drawin' these ornery hombres to him."

Jake Silver watched the rugged face of the big officer. There was anxiety written in Silver's lined countenance.

"Yuh're fightin' a tough battle, and alone, Ranger," he said after a moment. "Vale holds all the aces in this deal. I wish I could help yuh. But to tell yuh the truth I figgered I'd pull my freight if Vale wins this hand. I'll do whatever I can, though, as long as yuh keep goin' here."

Hatfield reached his decision.

"All right, Mr. Silver," he said. "Wynant hasn't the strength to smash Vale and the outlaw bands the man has collected. There's no time to try and fetch help from other parts even if we could get men to Galveston. Vale's men have the approaches covered and they can mow down riders on the causeway. I figger that within another day Vale will be king. He'll have leeched on to Galveston and he'll never let her go. The main chance we got to stop him is to rouse Banford Norton and such operators in the city before it's too late."

"Talkin' won't do it."

Jake Silver shook his head. He was as eager for Vale's defeat as was the Ranger, but Silver had seen Vale's waxing menace over Galveston, and he was older than Hatfield, without the officer's vigor and never-say die spirit.

"I aim to prove everything to the hilt," the Ranger said. "Could yuh fetch Ban Norton and some of his pards here this evenin'? I'll show 'em what Vale is up to."

"I could do that." Jake Silver nodded. "But what's yore idea?"

He listened intently, and heard the Ranger's plan.

"It's worth tryin' if yuh can deliver," he agreed when Hatfield had finished.

His shrewd eyes began to shine. He took a Navy revolver from a peg in the kitchen wall and from a cupboard drawer extracted shells to fill the chambers.

"I'll be in that fight if it comes off!" he declared.

CHAPTER XVI

"Who Rides a Tiger"

NOW sundown was at hand and Hatfield was pressed for time. He went to the window and called to Uncle, who left his perch and came to the kitchen door. The Ranger let him in.

"Sit down, Uncle," he invited. "Do yuh remember that long, leathery cuss who stopped us at the mainland end of the bridge today?"

"Yuh mean that Crane Riley? Yes suh, everybody in Galveston knows him.

Uncle dwelt on the island himself. He eked out a living with his mule and cart. Sometimes he helped unload schooners anchored in the shallow waves; other days he went to the mainland and brought loads of produce from plantations. on the bayou shores.

"The Crane, he ain't the kind to fool with," warned Uncle.

"I savvy that, Uncle," said Hatfield. "But I need to know just where Riley goes to. It's most dark now and nobody will be noticin' yuh, so you come back here in about an hour and tell me."

"I can do that, suh." Uncle nodded and went out.

Climbing to his seat on the high side of the cart, he picked up the lines. Ronald, the mule, did not want to wake up and go to work and Uncle had to coax him before he would budge. But finally Uncle prevailed and the cart creaked slowly away toward the center of the city.

The Ranger needed the cool drink and the warm food which Jake Silver could provide. Silver added extra rations to the meal he was preparing, to suit the Ranger's capacity. Hatfield took a long drink of water, then cleaned up, washing off the grime at the basin on the kitchen bench. He shaved with Silver's razor. His leg wound ached but was mending without trouble, and a fresh bandage covered it.

Silver was an excellent cook and the fried steak, potatoes, bread and butter, with several cups of steaming coffee, hit the spot. Rolling a smoke and relaxing after his meal, Hatfield could feel new strength flowing through his strong muscles.

"I'll snatch forty winks," he told Silver, "but wake me just as soon as Uncle gets back."

The nap was reviving. But it seemed that he had hardly closed his eyes when Jake Silver was shaking him by the shoulder and saying:

"Uncle's here, Ranger! Wake up."

Full night had fallen over the island. But Galveston blazed with lights. From Jake Silver's cottage they could hear the dim shouts of stevedores and sailors, the bellowing of steers, the clang of metal and the donkey engines on the docks where the ships were being loaded.

The wind, damp and cool, was off the Gulf. In the background the low growl of surf breaking on the beach provided an endless obbligato to the city sounds. In various spots people were beginning to enjoy themselves, drinking, eating, dancing, making love at the close of the work day. There were plenty of saloons and such places of entertainment in Galveston.

Jake Silver had opened the door and let Uncle into the kitchen and the old Negro stood before the Ranger as the tall officer sat up to hear the report.

"The man went to Peggoty's and he's eatin' his supper there," announced Uncle.

"Is he by himself, Uncle?" asked Hatfield, stretching his long arms.

"Yes suh. Leastways he was when he went in."

"*Bueno.*"

Hatfield checked his twin Colts, making certain the chambers were filled, that the guns slid without snagging in the oiled holsters.

"I want yuh to take me to Peggoty's, Uncle, under the sugar cane," he said. "I'm goin' after the Crane Riley."

Uncle's eyes rolled, but he was game. The Ranger followed him into the dark yard and climbed to the body of the cart while Uncle resumed his perch and argued with Ronald until the stubborn mule stepped out.

Peggoty's stood on the bay side of the city, a fairly long drive from Jake Silver's. Uncle did his best to browbeat or coax some speed out of Ronald, but the mule would only move at a walk.

"He's mad," Uncle explained to Hatfield, who lay flat in the cane behind the drivers. "It's way past his bedtime and he ain't had his supper yet."

UNCLE was a sharp observer, Hatfield discovered. The old man had noted where Riley had left his horse, twenty yards from the entrance to the popular tavern. The racks were crowded with teams and the mounts of customers. Riley's dark-hided gelding, a tame creature by the standards of the range, stood with reins tied to the long bar. Hatfield had Uncle stop close to the mount, but the officer remained crouched under the screen of sugar cane. Even though it was dark he still could see through the gaps in the load.

It was not a long wait. The Crane Riley soon emerged from Peggoty's and came toward them.

"Make out yuh're asleep, Uncle," whispered Hatfield.

Riley ducked under the continuous railing which served as a hitching-bar and also prevented horses from encroaching on the sidewalk. Hatfield drew his muscles together for a leap, but just as he was about to make his play, a rider called from the road.

"Riley! Wait a jiffy."

Uncle slumped over his reins, eyes shut, and snoring gently. Riley glanced at the cart and the old man on the perch but the picture was a common one in Galveston. The chief of the Dockrats took no further notice of Uncle and his mule. The Crane stepped past the cart and waited for the fellow who had called to him to ride over.

It was Blackjack Finnegan, the pock-marked rustler whose bunch had supplied Vale with the gunslingers needed to capture the big herd.

"Teakettle sent me in to town," reported Finnegan. "There's no sign yet of Wynant and his crew. We got outriders two miles up the road, but them ranchers ain't showed. Teakettle's worried. He thinks they may be collectin' help inland. We ain't been able to locate 'em at all. Got no idea what they're up to."

"Huh!" growled Riley. "Figgered the cusses would have come tearin' in long ago. We better speak to the boss. Come along. He's up the line."

Riley mounted and, with Finnegan, moved toward the piers. The Crane had a tough manner of acting but Hatfield, expert at such matters, had sensed that Riley had a weak spot. Hatfield had already observed that the strain had told on the commander of Galveston's Dockrats. As the two rode off, Hatfield heard Riley say:

"I'll be mighty glad when these cussed cows are on their way to Cuba!"

"What next, suh?" asked Uncle softly.

"We'll have to foller," Hatfield told him. "Are yuh with me, Uncle?"

For answer Uncle clucked to Ronald, who was sound asleep, this time. They poked along a side street toward the piers. Flaring red torches, lanterns and playing beams illuminated the busy scene as cursing men shoved and packed the beefs into the holds of the waiting ships.

By the time the slow mule arrived, Riley had signaled Archibald Vale, and Vale had joined his two lieutenants in the shadow cast by a warehouse looming over the waterfront. Uncle boldly checked the wagon near enough so that Hatfield could overhear the hurried talk.

" 'Who rides a tiger cannot dismount'," Vale was saying. "What's wrong, Crane? You look shaky. Why worry about a handful of stupid cowmen? In another twelve hours my ships will be filled and we'll have won. All you have to do is keep Wynant out of Galveston until then. That's easy enough. You have your men in the fort. They can wipe out any force tryin' to cross the bridge. And Finnegan and Teakettle hold the mainland."

"I figger Wynant and his pards are collectin' help and that they'll hit real hard," said the Crane, a sullen note in his nasal twang. He sniffed, not liking Vale's tone.

"Not even an army, unless they have artillery, could cross that narrow bridge with you holdin' it," insisted Vale. "Finnegan, when the fleet's loaded and has set sail I want you and Teakettle to collect every available rider and hunt down Wynant and his cattlemen friends. Run them all the way to their ranches if need be, but make certain they don't annoy me again. Buck up, Crane. Soon all Galveston will bow down to Archibald Vale. And you know what that will also mean to you!"

VALE'S eyes glinted. He had thrown back his silk cloak and the Navy revolver bulged in the wide sash, the gold patterns in its stock reflecting the ruby torch flares. The man's high sombrero added height to his slender figure. Vale, who had taken the field himself in order to win, looked the figure of an exotic field commander.

"Boss, I tell you I keep thinkin' about that big galoot that was out to your house and got away," protested Riley. "I ain't been able to get him off my mind since he come so close to killin' me that night. And he got away clean as a whistle. Then, what's happened to Horsemouth Eagen? He's dropped out of sight like he'd been shoved overboard with a ton of brick tied to him. Maggie Mulcahy's raised the roof, but not a sign of him.

Vale shrugged. "It makes no difference, if we're not bothered," he said coldly.

"I figger that hombre who grabbed Horsemouth must be a law officer, like we decided," insisted the Crane. "He could be a Texas Ranger, come on complaints from Wynant and buyers we run out of Galveston."

Finnegan did not like any talk about the Rangers and showed it by his uneasiness.

"I'll handle everything, even the Rangers," Vale snapped. "You're losin' your nerve, Riley." He turned away on his high-heeled riding boots.

The Crane and Blackjack Finnegan moved toward their horses. The rustler chief mounted and headed for the mainland with Vale's orders. The Crane waited until the rustler had turned a corner. As Hatfield had before noted, Riley's animal was a gentled creature, suited for use in city streets and to such a rider, as Riley, who was no range man. He slowly climbed to his saddle and sat there for a moment, staring after the man who paid him, his sallow face sour from the rebuke Vale had administered. Vale disappeared with vigorous pace around the far corner of the warehouse, in whose shadow stood the cart.

"Call Riley to the side of the wagon, Uncle," whispered Hatfield.

"Mr. Riley!" said Uncle sharply.

The Crane turned and stared, to see who had hailed him. He pulled his rein and clucked to his mount, pushing close to the driver of the cart.

"Why, yuh old rascal," he snarled. "What do you mean by botherin' me? Say, ain't I seen you a lot today? What you up to, anyway?"

He raised a quirt and slashed viciously at the old driver who dodged expertly. It brought him close to the side of the cart. Riley noticed nothing else, for he was intent on punishing Uncle, who put up an arm and drew back.

CHAPTER XVII

Broken

RISING from the cane just behind the Crane, Hatfield's steel fingers fastened about Riley's scrawny throat, lifting the man out of his saddle bodily. In one sweeping motion the Ranger jerked Riley over the edge and dashed him flat in the sugar cane.

Riley's cries died before they emerged. Cartilage crunched in Hatfield's unerring grip. The Dockrat leader's arms and legs flailed as he kicked and clawed in an attempt to break free, but he could not force breath through his windpipe.

He had a knife and a revolver in his belt but could not use them, with the Ranger upon him. Hatfield fell with all his weight, ramming a knee into his adversary's middle, completing the job of subduing his foe.

Riley's struggles grew weak, he shivered and twitched. The dry cane rustled under the fighting men.

"Grab his hoss' rein, Uncle!" called the Ranger. "Fasten it to the rail of the cart."

Uncle hurried to do Hatfield's bidding. By the time the horse was tied the Crane Riley lay limp and unconscious under the powerful Ranger. Hatfield pinned the Dockrat chief with his weight and as a precaution held a hand over the man's mouth.

"Drive on, Uncle," he ordered. "I'll tell yuh where, in a minute."

Uncle tickled Ronald with the switch he used for a whip. The cart creaked away, the tame horse docilely following behind.

When they turned the corner Uncle burst into laughter. He kept chuckling as he headed the mules toward Jake Silver's cottage on the bay at the Ranger's instructions.

"What's the joke?" Hatfield inquired of the old man.

"That Riley man looked like a frog yuh catch by the nose, the way he kicked when yuh pulled him from his saddle," explained Uncle. "He was shore enough s'prised when yuh rose up and grabbed him."

They had escaped unobserved, for the quick scuffle in the shadow of the warehouse had taken only instants. Hatfield watched over his shoulder, but there was no pursuit. Before long Uncle stopped the willing Ronald in Silver's yard.

Hatfield lifted down the Crane, shouldered the long, leathery Dockrat and carried him into the kitchen. Jake Silver had pulled curtains across the windows. He turned up the lamp and exclaimed in excitement as he recognized the prisoner.

"Yuh got him, Ranger!" Jake exulted. "But can yuh make him squawk when the time comes?"

"I reckon so, once I wake him up and impress him a little more," drawled Hatfield. "He's got the shakes to start with, and that's a help."

Silver told the Ranger that he had just returned from a run into the city. While Hatfield and Uncle had been stalking Crane Riley, the cattle dealer had gone to carry out the Ranger's request that he get in touch with Galveston business leaders.

"I'm expectin' Ban Norton and half a dozen more wharf owners here," Silver informed. "I rode to Norton's and he promised to fetch the others. Yore word goes a long way, Ranger."

Uncle came inside to be on hand to assist if he could. Hatfield brought a bucket of water from the bench, and they set about reviving Crane Riley. The prisoner kept twitching. As consciousness began to return his eyes rolled and he choked and swallowed. Then as dashes of water in his face began to affect him he muttered and groaned.

The Ranger had already relieved Riley of his pistol and long knife, so the Crane's fangs were extracted. The lank man was stretched out on the floor and Hatfield squatted beside him, working over him.

"Let me go! Take yore hands off my throat!"

With a violent start Riley returned to full consciousness. His eyes became riveted to the Ranger's rugged face and as he recognized his captor he emitted a rat-like squeak. His long nose twitched and he sniffled, the scalp under his close-cropped hair sliding back in horror.

"You!" he gasped, after he had taken in the mighty Hatfield, whose icy stare fascinated him. "I knew you was around, I could feel it." He did not miss the silver

star on silver circle pinned to the officer's shirt front. "So you *are* a Ranger. I told Vale so." He kept sniffing, and he was trembling. "You come within an inch of drillin' a hole in my head at Vale's, Ranger. I ain't been the same since. How in blazes did you get away when we had every man in Galveston huntin' you? And what did you do with Horsemouth Eagen?"

"I'll ask the questions and give the orders too, Riley," growled Hatfield, with a dark frown. "Sit up."

TO EMPHASIZE his command Hatfield grasped Riley's scrawny arm and jerked him to a sitting position. He took care that the Crane feel the steel of his fingers and again Riley shuddered, gulping and sniffing.

The Dockrat's gaze sought Silver and Uncle, but quickly returned to his captor's hard eyes. For moments the silence was thick enough to slice, and Riley could not stand it.

"What you aim to do to me, now you got me, Ranger?" he whined.

"I told yuh I'd ask the questions," snapped Hatfield ferociously.

He straightened to his full height, glaring down in contempt at his prisoner. He flicked one of his Colts from holster with a practised hand. The hammer spur came back under a long thumb and the Crane cowered back.

"Don't shoot me!" he begged.

Without answering, Hatfield checked the cylinders in his weapon and dropped it back into the sheath.

"I have forces in town that will bust Galveston wide open, Riley," he said then, grimly. "Yore Dockrats can't help yuh. Nor can Vale. He'll eat lead if he don't surrender."

Uncle and Silver gravely watched as the tall Ranger made further remarks to impress Crane Riley. Not much more was needed. The feel of the vise on his throat and arm, and his own imagination had done the trick.

"Somebody comin'," warned Uncle, at the door.

Silver went to the rear entry while Hatfield stood by, ready in case of trouble. From the look in Riley's eyes he seemed to have a wild hope it might be rescue but it was dashed when Silver let in the man who had driven into the yard.

"This is Ban Norton, Ranger Hatfield," said Silver, bringing the pier owner forward.

Ban Norton was a vigorous man of around fifty, with a heavy but short body. The years had touched his crisp hair with gray. He had a pugnacious face, with dark eyes and a bulldog jaw. He wore a plain blue suit, a white stock at his burly throat, and carried a silk hat and stout walking-stick.

"Glad to know you, Ranger. Welcome to Galveston." Norton smiled, nodding as he looked up at Hatfield.

"Thanks," replied Hatfield drily. "But I already been welcomed to Galveston by Archibald Vale and his pards.

Norton blinked, and laughed. Then he sighted the broken captive in the corner.

"What you doin' here, Riley?" he demanded.

"He's goin' to give you and yore friends a little talk," explained the Ranger. "Ain't yuh, Crane?"

Riley shook his head but as the Ranger scowled and took a step toward him he quickly nodded.

Ban Norton held no liking for the Crane for the Dockrats were thieves and made a practise of raiding the wharves. And he showed his contempt for the man by deliberately turning his back. It was not long before Uncle announced more visitors. Within a short time half a dozen more of Galveston's principal business men had collected in Silver's kitchen. They sat on the bench and chairs.

Hatfield stood beside Riley while he spoke to them, when all had arrived, his voice grave and low but urgently convincing.

"Yuh've let things get out of hand, gents," he said. "Archibald Vale will ruin yuh and either run yuh out of Galveston or kill yuh. He aims to take over Galveston wharfage and once he completes this cattle deal in Cuba he'll have the money to carry it through. Yuh'll be broken like Jake Silver and the cattle buyers who have already felt Vale's heavy hand. It's a question which of yuh will be found floatin' in the bay some mornin' if yuh don't stop Vale now."

He went on, going into details, and they listened as the tall officer warned them of their peril. The presence of Riley as the

Ranger's prisoner did much to emphasize what he said.

"Vale's plans are worked out to a T," Hatfield told them. "My investigation here has proved that. He'll plunder and kill till he wins what he's after. . . . Ain't that so, Riley? Speak up!"

The Crane blinked. For moments the Ranger feared that the chief of the Dockrats would not corroborate what he said. But finally Riley opened his thin-lipped mouth and spoke quaveringly.

"The Ranger's right. I told Vale he was bitin' off too much to chaw on. He aims to grab every big pier and warehouse in the city and he's got it all blocked out perfect. Norton, maybe you feel safe, but you're marked first to die, to scare the others." Riley took malicious pleasure in Norton's startled alarm.

"This present cattle deal is just a starter," declared Hatfield. "Vale's agents rustled the big herd, back on the range. The rightful owners were shot up and men caught lead or lost their cows, which means ruin for many, thanks to Vale. Now are you men beginning to see yore danger?"

BAN NORTON glanced at the set faces of his associates, reputable shipping men of the great port. What the Crane had said provided the cinching proof the Ranger had required.

"We've been blind fools," growled Norton. "I reckon I speak for all of us, Ranger. What do yuh want us to do?"

Hatfield was ready for that.

"Marshal yore police force under their chief, and get hold of every armed fightin' man yuh can trust. Silver will throw in his pards, the buyers. Stop yore stevedores from loadin' Vale's ships and order yore harbor master to refuse clearance to Vale's vessels, at once. I'll be in command of the army we'll need. The Crane's Dockrats are collected in the old fort at this end of the bridge with Vale in personal charge of 'em, and on the mainland a bunch of tough rustlers are lyin' in wait for Major Jackson Wynant and his men. I aim to sweep 'em up—Vale most of all."

The men stared at the grim, rugged face. The lamplight caught the sheen of the silver star on silver circle as the mighty Ranger gave his orders. Slowly, and wordlessly men began to get up and head for the door, hurrying to carry out the Ranger's instructions.

Within a few minutes only Uncle and the Crane were left in the kitchen, the old Negro guarding Riley who was secured with strong cords.

CHAPTER XVIII

Battle of the Causeway

THE livery stable where Hatfield had dropped off Goldy on that frantic night he had eluded Vale's fury was not far from Silver's cottage. When the Ranger reached the place a lantern burned in the door and a sleepy youth was on duty. The golden sorrel was running free in the corral at the rear, but when Goldy heard Hatfield's voice he trotted to the gate, sniffing for attention. Hatfield stroked the arched neck as he murmured a greeting.

"He looks in fine shape," the Ranger told the wrangler as he paid the score, saddled up, and checked his guns.

Riding up the dirt lane, he headed for the heart of the city, his gray-green eyes keeping a sharp lookout.

Galveston was boisterous. Wind from off the Gulf brought the noises from the piers and the strains of music and voices of carefree merrymakers from such spots as Peggoty's. On the Strand and Tremont Street strolled citizens unaware of the tense situation in the city, of the threatening storm about to burst as Ranger Hatfield made ready to smash Archibald Vale's enveloping hold. They did not as yet know, as Hatfield did, that Vale was a greater menace than the West Indian hurricanes that now and then swooped in on the low-lying isle, tearing at Galveston's heart.

Chin strap taut, pulling under his rugged jaw, star on his shirt and guns ready to go, Hatfield moved to join the fighters which Ban Norton and the rest had promised to supply.

When he reached the jail, a two-story brick building surrounded by a high wall garnished with broken glass set in the cement, the gate was closed. But Norton was waiting inside, and with him were the armed men needed for the job.

The city police chief had his constables drawn up. He saluted the Ranger. Among others waiting were stevedores and other employes of the pier owners, Jake Silver and the cattle buyers, and other Galveston citizens, all pledged to help. They were armed with pistols, shotguns or rifles. Many had horses waiting in the shadow of the jail walls.

"Here are the rockets yuh asked me for, Ranger," said Ban Norton, coming forward.

Signal rockets for use on stormy nights to communicate with ships in distress were common in the seaport. Hatfield had asked for several, and Norton had brought them.

The Ranger set a rocket and lighted the fuse, which took hold and sputtered with flame. The powder exploded and sent the flare high into the air over the city. Showers of brilliant sparks burst in the sky, and would be visible for miles on such a clear night. Hatfield counted to twenty before he let off two more of the lights.

"That ought to do it," he told Norton and Silver. "That's the signal I agreed on with Wynant. He's been hidin' near the coast, watchin' for it."

Lanterns diffused a yellow glow over the jail yard. They illuminated the features of the Ranger who had come to save Galveston. Men stared at his mighty figure as he took over.

"All right, boys," he said, his voice clear but easy. "We're goin' after 'em. As yuh likely know by now the Dockrats are at the old fort but we'll get up behind 'em. Later we'll have to deal with a rustler crew on the bridge, but we'll clean up the whole passel before we're through. Foller me, shoot straight and we'll win. That's all."

A cheer was begun, but Hatfield checked it by a wave of his long hand. He opened the gates and stepped out to mount the golden sorrel. Galveston men crowded after him, those with horses hurrying to pick them up.

Out on the street, the Ranger moved rapidly toward the bridge linking the island with the Texas mainland. That bridge was the key to Galveston, and having signaled Major Jackson Wynant he must clear the crossing before the cowmen fought through to it. The Dockrats in the fortifications could sweep that narrow way and massacre riders on it. Such riders would make easy targets, because oil lamps strung on poles over the wooden railing marked the long causeway.

"First thing is to crush the Dockrats," thought the Ranger, peering ahead in the night.

The city lights prevented him from seeing the fort on the far side of the bridge approaches. But he knew large numbers of dangerous outlaws were there under able lieutenants, though Crane Riley was his captive. And their orders were to kill the ranchers.

Archibald Vale probably was not with them now, for he should still be on the waterfront where his ships were taking on cattle for Cuba. Still, although Ban Norton and Jake Silver had worked as quietly as possible and had done a good job and a swift one in mobilizing opposition, there was no guessing whether or not Vale had received an alarm.

"I'll have to go after Vale soon as I can," decided Hatfield.

THE chief of police, with Ban Norton and Jake Silver acted as captains under the Ranger. Men on foot hurried after the mounted advance contingent.

Hatfield passed the road leading to the bridge. On the north the long breastworks loomed black in the gloom. The big problem was to prevent the Dockrats from rushing back into town, to reach Vale on the docks where they might put up a stiff and bloody battle.

"Norton, spread a line to the north and hook yore wing on the bay," ordered the Ranger. "Make it fast, savvy? Silver, you and the chief fetch yore boys and we'll make a stab at the rear of the fort."

Off the beaten highway the sorrel's hoofs crunched and slid in sand. There was only silence from the shadowed forts until Hatfield came within a hundred feet of the first redoubt. Then a gruff challenge reached him.

"Halt there! Who's that comin'?"

A stabbing beam of light fixed the Ranger and hastily swung for a survey of the steady advance of the constables and other fighting men who were bearing down on them.

"Throw down, Dockrats!" shouted Hatfield, spurting ahead.

A rifle bullet missed him by inches. He

opened with his Colts, and called back to his followers: "Fire!"

Cracking guns began to flame and lead kicked up sand or shrieked through the air. A horse was hit and screeched with eerie shrillness. Yells rose as the Dockrats sprang to arms.

Hatfield's charge carried him through. There were no mounds on this side behind which the defenders could crouch, for the fortifications had been designed to hold the bridge against attack from the main shore. Colts blaring, the Ranger flung himself in.

His fighting men were right behind him, strung out as they spurted toward the enemy. The clash was audible as they met. Hand-to-hand fighting began, men shooting point-blank.

But the vicious Dockrats scrambled over the breastworks, screening themselves as Hatfield and his men ranged into the spacious inner area. The clang of battle filled the night.

Hoarse halloas sounded from the nearby causeway, and riders pounded into sight—Blackjack Finnegan and a score of his outlaws. But only a fraction of the large rustler band appeared. The Ranger did not see Teakettle Jones and the main bunch.

Pressing the riders close came Major Jackson Wynant, Betcha Steve Pittman, and more ranchers. As soon as the rockets had told them that Hatfield was ready they had made it quickly. But the Ranger realized that Finnegan and his handful of killers were leading the cowmen into range of the Dockrats' guns.

"Let 'em have it, Riley!" roared Finnegan, waving toward the fort.

It was vital to smash the Dockrats now. A few volleys from them would sweep the bridge, wipe out Wynant and every man with him.

Hatfield threw himself from his saddle.

"Come on, boys!" he yelled. "Jump the mounds and take 'em!"

It was nip and tuck as the Ranger led the charge. He scrambled over the ramp and jumped down among the viciously fighting Dockrats. His men followed, and Dockrats began scurrying off along the beach. Then gunfire crackled on the north as Ban Norton closed in, and the Dockrats found themselves hemmed in. Some took to the water, to escape by swimming, while a few who reached the railway trestle sought to climb the supports. But most of them tossed away their arms and hugged the sand.

"Norton!" roared Hatfield over the din.

"Here I am!"

"Take over. Sweep 'em up fast as yuh can."

He hurried back and leaped to his saddle. As he galloped for the Galveston end of the bridge, the men afoot came up and he turned them in time to block Blackjack Finnegan.

Finnegan, in the forefront of his bunch of outlaws, was horrified as he recognized the glinting silver star.

"A Ranger!" he howled.

Tough stevedores, pistols and shotguns talking, surged onto the crossing. The cattlemen's contingent, under Major Wynant, shoved up. No fire came from the fort to aid the outlaws. Lights flashed there as Ban Norton made wholesale captures.

BLACKJACK FINNEGAN tossed his Colt over the rail into the bay and raised his hands in the air. His men followed suit.

Betcha Pittman came rushing up.

"At last!" he cried, his huge hands seizing the rustler.

But menacing as Betcha might be in his righteous rage, Finnegan's attention was not on him. His frightened eyes were riveted on the tall Texas Ranger.

The firing was abating where the Dockrats had made their last stand. Then Hatfield, pushing past the captured rustlers, heard a burst of pistol shots from the west. The bridge thundered to the beat of hoofs.

He moved the sorrel to the end of the line, and into his range of vision came Teakettle Jones. On a fast mount, the dwarf presented a ferocious appearance, his torso looming more huge than when he was afoot. His black beard bristled. He was whooping it up as he led a large band into Galveston.

"I savvy now," muttered Hatfield. "Finnegan was to lead Wynant in where the Dockrats could riddle 'em. Then Teakettle and the main bunch would come on and sweep up any who managed to turn and retreat!"

At that moment, Teakettle Jones saw the tall officer on the sorrel. Bellowing a challenge, and digging his spurs deep

into the sides of his black, he plunged onward, closely pressed by hard-riding rustlers. Some were his own men, but many more belonged to Blackjack Finnegan's crew.

Hatfield held the middle of the bridge, his Colt ready, hammer spur back under his thumb. Naturally, Teakettle did not yet know what had occurred, that the Dockrats were crushed, and Finnegan a prisoner. The dwarf came on at full speed, a Navy six-shooter raised for a shot.

Teakettle's eyes blazed, and he crouched low over his mustang, riding with a centaur's ability.

"The jig's up, Teakettle!" called Hatfield.

But if the dwarf heard he did not believe. He kept coming and his hissing grew audible to the Ranger. A bullet from the Navy pistol whirled past Hatfield's ear, and a rustler with his hands raised over his Stetson howled as the slug slashed his fingers.

Hatfield had to shoot. Teakettle Jones was determined to kill him. The dwarf, in his mad rush, was almost upon him and taking more careful aim. The Ranger lifted his thumb, the heavy revolver kicking against his palm.

Teakettle Jones was hit. He straightened up, hissing violently, and his second bullet plugged past the railing into the water. One of Hatfield's men knocked him from his mount and the dwarf fell, hit the guard fence and rolled off into the gleaming bay below. His mustang slowed, veered past Goldy, and came to a halt as Wynant seized his bridle.

Betcha Pittman, with other mounted ranchers and cowboys, had turned to face the rustlers behind Teakettle. As the outlaws saw Teakettle down and the Ranger holding the bridge, they sought to pull up and swing in retreat, but the crush was too great in the narrow way. A few shots from Hatfield and his fighting men, with the mounting array surging upon them, started the ball rolling, and the outlaws tossed away their arms. A handful at the rear managed to whirl their animals and pelt back toward the mainland, but for the most part they were Ranger prisoners.

Hatfield rode to the Galveston end of the bridge. He had to weave through the excited crowds.

"I'll leave the rustlers to you, Major Wynant," he called. "I'm goin' to hunt Vale!"

CHAPTER XIX

Last Call

BAN NORTON and Jake Silver were looking for the Ranger when he reached the end of the bridge. Silver had a wide grin on his face, and Norton was highly satisfied.

"We've swept up most of the Dockrats," reported Norton. "The jail will be filled tonight. That bunch of crooks was always mighty elusive. It was hard to pin anything on 'em, but this time we can hold them on serious charges."

"I want Vale," the Ranger told them. "We won't be finished until I do get him."

"I saw him!" cried Silver. "He rode through that street just ahead there, and after a quick look at what was goin' on, he swung his hoss and galloped out of sight. I took a shot at the cuss but he was movin' fast and the range was too long. Missed him."

"Which way did he go," asked Hatfield. "Toward the house?"

"No. I believe he hooked over to the piers on the east side of town."

Hatfield hurried on, to follow the trail of Archibald Vale. Even if there was only one way to ride a horse out of Galveston there were plenty craft in the water surrounding the island.

Things had quieted down on the docks, for Hatfield's orders had been carried out. About two-thirds of the great herd had been loaded into the ships and the rest of the cattle were in the wharf pens. Schooners warped in by heavy lines stood ghostly in the night, their bare masts pointing to the sky.

Goldy stepped proudly along the Strand as Hatfield hunted for Vale. There were thousands of places to hide in the city, and Vale was clever. He would not allow himself to be easily found.

Suddenly Hatfield heard a sharp creaking.

"That's a winch workin', Goldy," he murmured, and he headed toward the sound, down along the docks.

Riding past a hulking, dark warehouse built over the water, Hatfield saw activity. A white schooner with rakish racing lines had been warped to the right of the pier. That was the scene of the activity. He moved out on the dock. Riding lights, and a light high in the foremast, gave him a view of the deck and the superstructure.

There were men on the quarterdeck and sailors were busy casting off, while others were raising sail. To Hatfield's ears came the dull beat of an auxiliary engine.

The Ranger dismounted at the ship's high bow. Gangplanks had been pulled in, the side hatch covers fastened.

He trotted along the stringpiece, past the pen where stolen cattle stood. The schooner shadowed him, and finally he came to a point from which he could see the captain, who was calling terse orders through a megaphone.

"Hold up there, Cap'n!" shouted the Ranger. "Yuh got no clearance tonight out of this port!"

Silence greeted this. Then the captain shouted: "Who's that hailin' me?"

"Ranger Jim Hatfield."

There was another period of silence. When the captain spoke again through his megaphone there was a desperate note in his voice.

"Cast off! Full speed astern."

Hatfield could only guess what was going on. But he had a good idea, and the schooner was close to the wharf. Heavy lines hung from the rail. Grasping one, and putting his booted feet against the wooden side, he pulled himself quickly up and over onto the deck, gun in hand.

He caught the shine of brass buttons on the ship captain's uniform. As Hatfield ran lightly along the main deck, the engine was already in gear and the screw turning, the schooner slowly backing from her berth. He knew Vale was aboard, even before a bullet slashed into the planking, kicking up oak splinters.

A ladder led to the after deck. He bobbed up quickly, his Colt ready for use as he scrambled into view. A dark, thin figure in a cape was close to the ship's commander.

"Don't shoot, Ranger!" bawled the captain. "It ain't my fault. Vale's got a gun on me!"

"Keep low, Captain!" warned Hatfield. "I'm comin', Vale!"

THE captain threw himself to the deck, but screamed an instant later as Vale in his fury fired into him. Hatfield saw the flare of the killer's pistol and tried for Vale. His bullet whirled close to the dark form of his adversary, so close that Vale ducked and jumped back. Two hasty missiles whipped past the Ranger. Vale would fight to the end. He would never surrender.

Vale was at the turn of the after house. With part of his tigerish body protected by the thick wood he thrust out his left shoulder and arm for the kill.

"You'll never take me, Ranger!" he screamed. He had lost his sombrero and against the lighted sky his head stood out, a roundish black target.

Hatfield felt the clip of lead, just as he checked his rush and went down on one knee for careful aim. He held a steady bead and, cool in the highest pitch of conflict, took the moment of time needed for the best marksmanship.

He raised his thumb, his gun roared, and Vale's head and shoulder disappeared.

The Ranger immediately leaped to one side. Vale might still be alive, perhaps unhurt, behind the bulk of the cabin. The ship's captain lay moaning on the deck, where he had rolled against the rail, and excited sailors were shouting.

Hatfield started around the other way, gun up and ready. He scouted the next two turns and, on the opposite side could see a dark, crumpled figure.

Wary of any trap, Hatfield approached. But Archibald Vale had shot his last bolt. He was dead, a Ranger bullet lodged in his dangerous brain.

* * * * *

Back at Austin headquarters Captain William McDowell heard his tall officer's terse report.

"Yuh captured Horsemouth Eagen, Blackjack Finnegan, Crane Riley and a passel of rascals who needed it mighty urgent," McDowell said, nodding. "I've had wires from Wynant, Norton and Silver, all congratulatin' me on havin' such a Ranger."

"Thanks, suh. I reckon Wynant and his pards will make out fine now. Jake Silver and the other Galveston cattle buyers have resumed tradin' since Vale

lost out. They bought that big herd from the ranchers at good prices."

"Here's a telegram come for yuh this mornin' just before yuh rode in on Goldy."

McDowell passed it to his investigator. Hatfield opened it and read:

HOPE YOU WILL COME TO OUR WEDDING. MIMI AND I ARE GETTING MARRIED THE FIFTEENTH OF NEXT MONTH. BETCHA PITTMAN

"*Bueno.*" Hatfield was pleased. He placed the message so McDowell could scan it. "Betcha's a great hombre in more ways than one," he said, "and he's gettin' a mighty fine bride."

Captain McDowell frowned as he regarded his tall young aide.

"Yuh looked peaked, Hatfield," he commented. "Appears the sea air didn't agree with yuh!"

Hatfield grinned, aware of the captain's real meaning.

"I did a passel of runnin' around in Galveston," he said. "But I'm ready to ride when yuh give the word."

McDowell rattled a sheaf of papers.

"This business I got in mind now is a long way from the Gulf but the trouble's bad enough to call for a troop," he growled.

The word had been spoken, the word which would again start the Ranger on his travels.

With the details in his clever mind, Jim Hatfield took his leave. On the golden sorrel he rode again to carry Ranger law through the vast reaches of the Lone Star empire.

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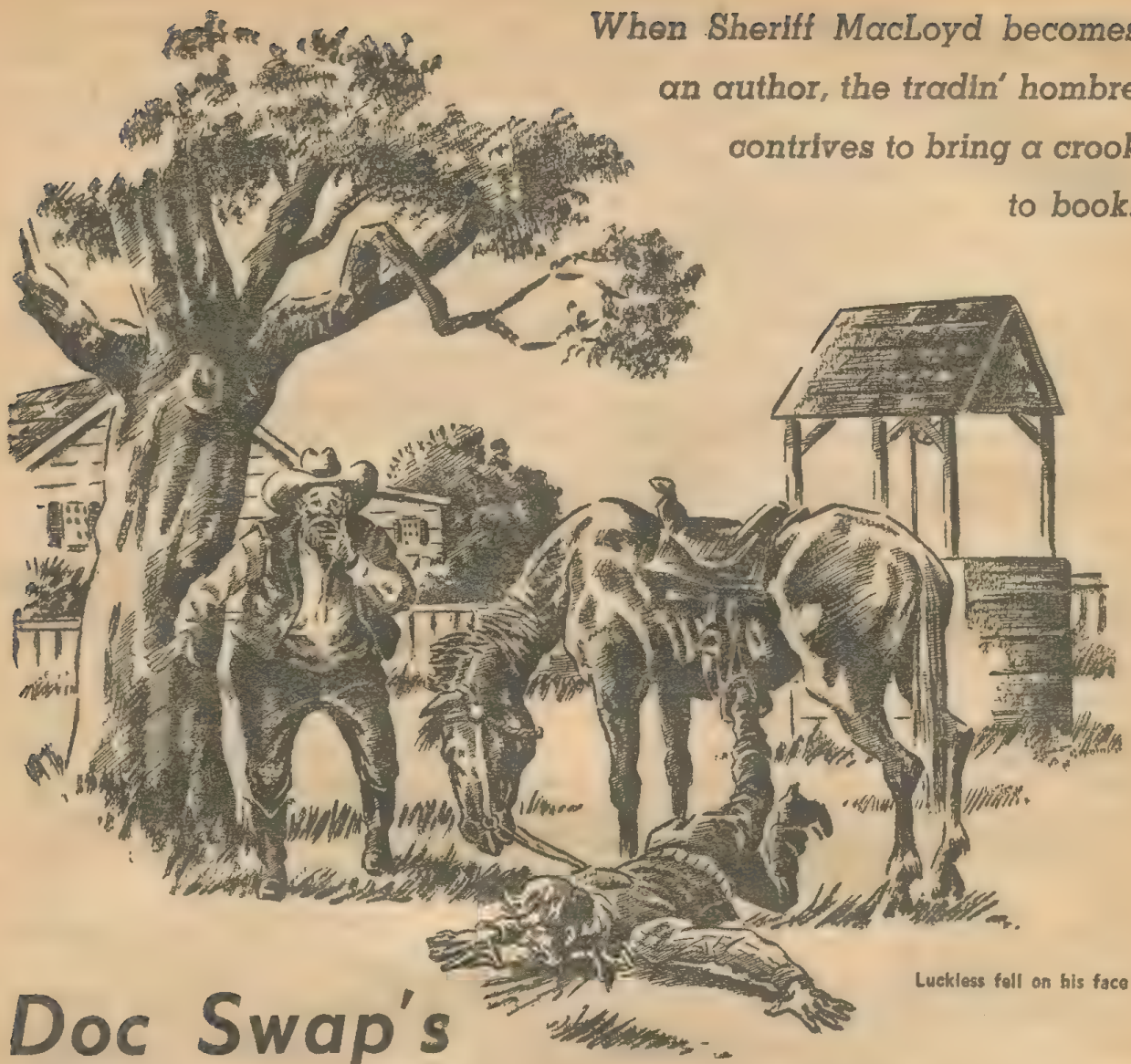


Luckless fell on his face

Doc Swap's GABBLE GAG

by BEN FRANK

STANDING by the front room window in his small neat cottage, old Doc Swap cussed through his ragged white whiskers. He was both worried and mystified. Worried by the fuss Big Jim Ferris was kicking up in Bluff County about Sheriff MacLoyd. Mystified because the sheriff wasn't doing anying to counteract Big Jim's babbling.

"Dad-blasted ole hoss-thief," Doc muttered, fondly thinking of the bony old sheriff. "Reckon I'll have to help the danged ole cuss."

Seeing Big Jim Ferris riding at a fast clip along Dry Bluffs' one street cut Doc short. The giant-sized homesteader was angling straight for the jail, and Doc guessed his visit meant more trouble for MacLloyd. Not that Doc would admit he didn't like to see the sheriff in trouble up to his oversized ears.

On the surface, Doc Swap and the sheriff of Bluff County were bitter rivals —had been for forty years—in the two

occupations dearest to Doc's heart, fiddle playin' and swappin'. The roaring, cussing feud between them had everybody fooled, including themselves, but let one of them get into serious trouble, and the other never failed to come to his rescue. And now, Doc reckoned, something had to be done before Big Jim's talk went too far, or MacLoyd would be out in the cold.

Snorting angrily, he grabbed up his fancy pearl-gray Stetson—he'd swapped a wind-broken old horse for the hat and considered the trade one of the highlights of his career—and jammed it over his head clear down to his pink ears. Fat face puckered into a do-or-die expression, he shoved out into the bright afternoon sunshine.

WHAT he saw coming along the dusty street drove all thoughts of Sheriff MacLoyd from his mind. He rubbed his eyes and stared. He reckoned what he saw was a horse, all right, with a stranger riding it, but what a horse! A sickly gray color with a lot of large black spots strung over his mangy hide. Knock-kneed, bony, sway-backed, a wicked gleam in a pair of red-rimmed eyes. A bridle held together by rusty baling wire. A saddle that no self-respecting horse would carry.

Then Doc took a look at the rider. He was as decrepit as his horse and gear. Hatless, tangled blond hair reaching skyward, hollow cheeked, hollow chested, long, bony, a look of quiet resignation to his fate on his seamy face.

"Howdy," the stranger said sadly. "Reckon a feller could help hisself to a drink from yore well?"

"Reckon so," Doc murmured, fascinated by the apparent down-and-out condition of the man and his horse.

"Hope there ain't no openin' in that well curb big enough for me to fall through," the stranger sighed. "My name's Luckless Lester. Ever'thing bad happens to me."

He started to slide to the ground, got a foot tangled in a stirrup and fell flat on his face. He lifted himself up on his bony elbows and grinned feebly at Doc.

"See? Even gettin' off'n Polka Dot, I have trouble."

The wheels in Doc's head spun so fast he felt dizzy, for in Polka Dot he saw a possible cure for the sheriff's trouble.

The last few days, Sheriff MacLoyd had been wandering about, a dazed look in his pale eyes, a dreamy expression on his homely face. He spoke only when spoken to, and he seemed to have lost all interest in his duties.

Lately there had been some petty stealing going on, but instead of trying to get at the bottom of the trouble, the sheriff had shooed all complainers away from his office without so much as a promise to look into matters. And now Big Jim Ferris had started the talk that Sheriff MacLoyd had come into his dotage and was no longer fit to be sheriff. What lay behind this strange manner of the sheriff's, Doc Swap hadn't the least idea, but seeing Luckless Lester's polka dot horse was the inspiration he'd been needing.

"What'll yuh take for yore hoss an' outfit?" he asked.

Luckless Lester picked himself up carefully.

"What'll yuh give?"

Looking Polka Dot over, Doc shuddered slightly. He wouldn't be caught dead owning a horse like that, but nevertheless, he had to have the ugly critter. He shoved fat fingers into a vest pocket and pulled out a tin watch.

Luckless eyed the watch with disapproval. "Can't eat no watch," he said. "Throw in a meal to boot an', by kidney, I might swap."

Now, Doc Swap was no hand to give boot in a trade, but the more he looked at the old horse, the worse he wanted him.

"It's a deal," he said. "Put the hoss in my barn, while I fix up some grub."

Luckless Lester gathered up the wired-together reins and led Polka Dot toward Doc's red barn. Going through the door, he failed to duck his head, giving it a hard crack against the upper door frame. Doc waddled back into his house and hastily prepared a big meal for his guest. From the looks of Luckless Lester, he reckoned that the man was hollow all the way down.

An hour later, whistling softly between his teeth, Doc headed for the sun-warped jail. His plan was a simple one. He would swap Polka Dot sight unseen to MacLoyd for anything the sheriff had to offer. MacLoyd was a good judge of horse-flesh, and once he got a look-see at Polka Dot, Doc

figured he'd go straight up and explode like a firecracker.

If anything could shake Sheriff MacLoyd out of his dazed condition, owning Polka Dot could. Once shaken out of his daze, Doc hoped that the bony sheriff might become his former cussing, hard-headed self and squelch Big Jim's gossip.

PUFFING, Doc climbed the three rickety steps of the rail and barged into the two-by-four office. What he saw made him forget Polka Dot.

Sheriff MacLoyd sat behind his scarred desk. On the desk lay a three inch stack of ruled writing paper. Arranged along the front edge of the desk were sixteen newly sharpened lead pencils. One sheet of paper lay under the sheriff's bony hands.

Seeing Doc, MacLoyd scowled angrily, uncrossed his bony bowed legs and cut loose with a hissing stream of tobacco juice. A battered brass spittoon rocked dizzily under the impact.

"What's the i-dee of comin' here without bein' asked?" he demanded.

In forty years, Doc had never seen MacLoyd with a pencil over two inches long. Now he had sixteen brand new ones. Doc swallowed hard and took a breath.

"What'n tarnation are yuh up to?" he asked.

"Ain't none of yore business," MacLoyd answered tartly, "but it ain't no secret. I'm writin' a book!"

"A book!" Doc had never known MacLoyd to read a book, let along think about writing one. "What about?" he gasped.

"About my experiences," MacLoyd answered with dignity.

"Why?" Doc wheezed.

"Why?" MacLoyd eyed him pityingly. "Why does anybody write a book?"

"I ain't got the least idea," Doc admitted.

"To make hisself famous an' rich," MacLoyd stated.

The wheels in Doc's head turned a couple of rounds. "So this is why yuh been goin' about like a love-sick girl?" he said. "Yuh got book writin' on yore mind, an' for a fool thing like this, yuh're lettin' everything else go to pot."

Bright anger flashed into the bony man's pale eyes. He got to his feet and shook a long finger under Doc's fat nose.

"Lis'n, yuh sawed-off, over-stuffed bag o' beans an' beef," he roared, "writin' a book ain't no fool thing! Incidental, I'm a busy man, an' I ain't got no more time to waste on you than I had on Big Jim Ferris a few minutes ago. Even if somebody did bust in an' steal a ole saddle from him, an' a gold watch."

"Sheriff," Doc said, "people are talkin' about yuh."

"Let 'em talk," MacLoyd said with a shrug of his bony shoulders. "After I get this book finished, I'll be so rich an' famous it won't make no difference."

"How much have yuh got writ?" Doc asked.

"Well," MacLoyd frowned, "I got the title writ."

He held up the lone sheet of paper, and Doc read, "The Adventures of Sheriff MacLoyd."

"Purty, ain't it?" MacLoyd said, eyeing his work with a pleased expression.

Doc suddenly remembered his mission and became diplomatic.

"Sure is purty," he agreed a little too quickly.

Dark suspicion leaped into the sheriff's mind.

"What'd yuh come here for anyhow?" he demanded.

"Knowin' yuh're a great unsight-unseen swapper," Doc purred, "I figured we might do a little business."

"No!" MacLoyd roared. "Us book writers ain't got no time to waste on swaps!"

Doc felt a sudden faintness. Things were worse than he'd thought.

MacLoyd picked up a pencil and pointed toward the door.

"Kindly depart," he said coldly. "An g'by!"

Doc felt a stir of anger. "Why, yuh skinny ole—"

Doc's voice sputtered to a stop. He never could talk when he was this mad. He jerked his fancy hat tight, stepped outside and shut the door so hard it shook the jail on its foundation.

"The ole coyote!" he fumed. "Orderin' me out."

"Hi-ya, Doc," a voice said, and Doc looked up into the grinning face of Cy Pulley, the local barber.

"We need a new sheriff!" Doc wheezed.

"Might have us a new one at that." Cy

said. "Hear lots of talk in my shop. People're gettin' kinda fed up about MacLoyd doin' nothin' no more but sharpen pencils."

"Good!" Doc snorted.

BUT he didn't mean it. He hurried away, a tight inward worry making his red face wrinkle like a cooled-off baked apple.

"Got to do somethin'," he kept muttering. "Reckon it's time to head for Sugar Valley."

Whenever Doc had a problem to solve, he went on a swappin' spree through the valley. Nesters were beginning to settle up along Sugar Creek, and nesters were swappers. Trading sharpened Doc's mind, and if he was to do anything about the sheriff and his fool book-writing idea, Doc guessed he'd need a sharp mind.

He increased his waddling pace, only to come to a sudden halt when he met Luckless Lester face to face. Seeing Luckless reminded him he was the owner of likely the meanest-looking horse in the world and that he wouldn't be caught dead with such a critter on his hands.

"How about swappin' me back that watch for yore hoss?" Doc asked hopefully. "Yuh'd still be ahead a meal."

"I'd be powerful glad to do that, Doc," Luckless mumbled, "but I was gettin' myself a drink an' dropped the watch in the well."

Doc made a quick decision. "I'll just give yuh the hoss."

Luckless shook his head. "Doc, I allus had considerable pride an' don't aim to lose it by takin' somethin' for nothin'."

He turned, started to walk away, got a toe caught in a crack in the board walk and went sprawling on his face.

"Things allus happen to me," he muttered sadly.

Doc went on home. The first thing he saw was Polka Dot's ugly head sticking through the open barn door. Doc glanced uneasily about. Apparently his neighbors were not looking. Relieved, Doc shooed Polka Dot back out of sight and shut the door. He reckoned now that he had two problems on his hands. One, to shake the sheriff out of the doldrums. Two, to get shed of Polka Dot.

He knew quite well that trading the horse off was out of the question. Not a man, woman or child in Bluff County would take the critter as a gift. There remained but one thing to do. Take Polka Dot to Sugar Valley and turn him loose. The wornout saddle and bridle might offer some swapping possibilities, but Doc doubted it. He was stuck, and he knew it.

Perched on the spring seat of the covered wagon in which he carried his "swappin' goods," old Doc Swap headed out of Dry Bluffs the next morning before daylight. He wasn't going to be caught with Polka Dot on his hands. By the time the sun was up, Doc's sleek bays had pulled the wagon well into Sugar Valley.

Doc halted his outfit, climbed down and slipped the wired-together bridle off Polka Dot's ugly head.

"Scat!" Doc said.

A hurt expression came into Polka Dot's red-rimmed eyes, but he ambled away toward the creek. Doc got back into his wagon and drove on. Just before going over a hill, he glanced back. Polka Dot stood in the trail, his head hanging dejectedly.

"Dad-blasted ornery critter," Doc growled. But in a way, he felt kind of mean, leaving Polka Dot to shift for himself.

Rounding a curve, Doc almost ran Luckless Lester down.

The man grinned up sadly. "Wonder one of yore hosses hadn't put his foot right in my mouth," he said.

"Where yuh goin'?" Doc asked.

"Back home," Luckless answered. "Figure I'm less unlucky there than anyplace I've been."

"If home's the way I'm goin', hop in," Doc invited.

Luckless started to climb into the wagon, slipped and bumped his bony chin on the front wheel. With Doc's help, he made it up to the spring seat on the second attempt.

"What did yuh do with Polka Dot?" Luckless wanted to know.

"Turned him loose," Doc said.

"Don't blame yuh. How come yuh didn't throw my saddle away?"

"Figured I might swap it off," Doc answered.

Luckless eyed him pityingly. "Doc, ain't yuh very bright?"

Doc shook his head. "I reckon not."

They came to Bill Clink's bachelor quar-

ters on the right bank of Sugar Creek. Bill had a weak stomach and made his own stomach cure out of whatever came handy. But he preferred wild grapes. Now he sat on a stump in the shade, looking sad indeed.

"Doc," he complained, "we gotta have us a new sheriff. A consarned thief busted into my smokehouse an' stole my only three gallon stone jar. An' all them wild grapes gettin' ripe."

Doc, followed by Luckless Lester, had climbed from the covered wagon. Doc lifted up the battered saddle.

"Hossback ridin' is good for weak stomachs," he said blandly. "Got a saddle here I might swap off—"

BILL snorted in high disgust. "Wouldn't own that thing!"

At that moment, Luckless Lester put one big foot on the teeth of a garden rake, which Bill had left lying on the ground, and the handle flew up and rapped Luckless on the nose. The blood spurted.

"Gog-gone!" Bill said apologetically. "I shouldn't ought to have left that rake there. Reckon yuh won't sue me, or—"

The wheels in Doc's head spun. He frowned deeply and pointed a fat accusing finger at Bill's leathery face.

"That's exactly what he oughta do!" he said flatly. "An' with me as a witness to yore carelessness, I reckon he'd—"

"Now, Doc," Bill said feebly, "I was merely jokin'."

"I ain't," Doc cut in. "Lester an' me is sorta partners, an' I feel responsible for him, him bein' a stranger."

"Doc," Bill said worriedly, "I might swap for that saddle."

"Ain't wantin' to swap off the saddle now," Doc said coldly. "Howsomever, I got a bridle that—"

When Doc and Luckless departed from Bill Clink's cabin, Bill owned a wired-together bridle and the hope that he would not spend the rest of his days behind bars for carelessness. Doc had the rake, a ten-pound bag of flour and an old cross-cut saw to boot. Not that Doc intended to do any sawing, but a swap wasn't a swap without boot. Even in a case like this.

As they jogged along the trail, Luckless Lester murmured, "Doc, I reckon I wouldn't of sued that there hombre for—"

"Lester," Doc smiled, "yuh just leave the reckonin' to me."

It was about noon when they came to Ed Lunt's homestead. Face scrubbed, his thin hair slicked back, Ed sat on the front porch of his house, waiting for his wife, Minnie, to call him to dinner.

Doc cast a furtive glance at Ed's pile of pole wood. "Got a right fair cross-cut I might swap yuh," he said.

Ed shuddered and turned pale. "Wouldn't have one of them danged things on the place! Don't never mention it!"

Just then, a calf came bounding around the house.

"Hey," Ed cried, leaping to his feet, "help me catch—"

Luckless Lester obligingly started to head off the calf. He took ten running steps, and the sagging wire of Minnie Lunt's clothesline caught him under the chin. He did a wild flip-flop, landed on the back of his scrawny neck and passed out cold.

"Gosh all fish-hooks!" Ed bleated.

Doc faced him sternly. "Anybody who'd let a clothesline sag like that, makin' a death trap, oughta be sued. Mebbe, tried for manslaughter! If Lester'd call on me as a witness—"

"Doc," Ed panted, "you an' me is ole friends. Yuh wouldn't witness— Mebbe I could use that cross-cut. We might figure us out a nice swap if yuh'd kinda forget about everything."

Luckless Lester opened his eyes. "What happened?" he asked.

"Yuh forgot to duck when yuh went under that clothesline," Doc said severly. "After this, be more careful!"

He hauled the cross-cut saw out of the wagon and began to talk trade. For the saw, he got the calf, dinner for himself and his new partner, and later on from Minnie, who was also upset over Luckless' mishap, a rusty flatiron and an old lamp shade.

In the course of their conversation at the dinner table, Ed mentioned the fact that he'd had an old set of buggy harness stolen a few nights before.

"Like Big Jim Ferris says," Ed growled, "we need a new sheriff. Big Jim even said he'd take over the job if we could get rid of MacLoyd."

Doc said nothing, but he was doing some thinking. So Big Jim wanted to be sheriff. Maybe that explained why

he was doing so much talking against MacLoyd.

LATER, jogging along toward Sugar Creek, Luckless Lester observed, "Doc, I don't see how yuh do it. It seems yuh can take somethin' nobody wants an' swap it to him easy as pie."

"Swappin' comes natural to me," Doc said innocently.

They made their next stop at Homer Prutt's tar-papered shack. Homer was a bachelor who farmed because he had to eat and invented things because he liked to tinker. So far, his inventions had been dismal failures. His weakness was cog wheels.

He stood in the doorway of his lean-to workshop, eyeing Doc and Luckless with deep suspicion.

"Homer," Doc said kindly, "yuh look worried."

"Am worried," Homer admitted. "There's a thief runnin' loose. Stole one of my inventions. A cockroach exterminator. A contraption with two boards that bang together, smashin' the cockroaches."

"Did it work?" Doc asked.

"Only trouble with it," Homer sighed, "was that the cockroaches wouldn't stay on the board long enough to get smashed. Figured I'd fix that someway, but now it's stole."

"That's a pity," Doc said sympathetically. "Say, I got a good garden rake I'd swap yuh for somethin'."

Homer shook his head. "Wouldn't consider swappin' for nothin' unless it had cog wheels. Need some cog wheels for—"

Just then, Luckless Lester let out a blood curdling howl. He'd been poking around one of Homer's inventions and now had his right arm caught in a large boxlike contraption.

Homer looked pleased. "That's my rabbit-catcher," he informed Doc. "Yuh see, a rabbit runs into that hole he's got his arm in an' gets caught, an—"

"Yuh mean to say yuh'd leave a dangerous thing like that settin' around for some innocent man to get caught in?" Doc demanded angrily. "Don't yuh know yuh could be sued?"

"Get me outa this thing!" Luckless bellowed.

"See," Doc said. "He's gettin' right upset. Wouldn't surprise me none but what he takes this to court. An' I'd likely be called on to testify."

Red-rimmed eyes filled with a new worry, Homer hurriedly released Luckless' arm from the rabbit-catcher.

"Doc," the inventor pleaded. "Yuh wouldn't testify—"

"As I was sayin'," Doc interrupted, "I got a rake to swap off."

"Been wantin' a rake bad," Homer wheezed.

When Doc and Luckless left Homer's place, Homer had a fair garden rake. Doc had a string of smoked sausages, two cans of corn, a box of large fishhooks and a ball of stout twine to boot.

"Beats all get-out," Luckless mumbled, "how that feller took a sudden notion to that rake."

"Just goes to show how people sometimes change their minds about what they want," Doc said, jogging his bays into a trot.

As they approached the creek, Doc glimpsed something half-hidden among the trees that lined the bank. He headed his bays toward the half-hidden object, for Doc had a lump of curiosity larger than a haystack. A few minutes later, he saw a faded wall tent—and Sheriff MacLoyd!

In front of the sheriff stood a folding table on which rested a three inch stack of writing paper and the sixteen carefully sharpened pencils. MacLoyd himself sat slumped on a canvas stool, his jaws chomping viciously, his eyes fixed on one single sheet of paper under his bony fingers.

Hearing Doc's wagon, MacLoyd lifted his thin face. Sudden anger leaped into his pale eyes.

"Dad-gum't!" he roared. "I move outa my office so's I won't be disturbed, an' what happens? Yuh have to come rattlin' around. Turn them hosses about an' git!"

"Okay," Doc said soothingly. "How's the book comin'?"

"Only fair to middlin'," MacLoyd admitted. "In fact, I'm still workin' on the title." He held up the sheet of paper. "See, I've changed it from writin' to printin'."

"Looks a lot better that way," Doc observed.

At that, a pleased expression came to

the sheriff's face, only to be replaced by dark suspicion.

"I ain't got no time to do no unsight-unseen swappin'!" he said. "Adios, an' stay plumb away! A man can't do no authorin' with a fat ole busy-body pesterin' him."

DOC felt his face turning red. He got all set to make a hot retort, but changed his mind. Coming back at the sheriff would simply be a waste of breath, he knew, for the dreamy look was back on the bean-pole man's homely face.

"What's the matter with that feller?" Luckless Lester asked as they drove on. "Touched in the head?"

"Worse'n that," Doc growled. "He's plumb loco!"

Shortly, they came to Loop and Puney Porter's homestead. Here they found the two men digging a well, their shaggy heads sticking just above the ground. They both eyed Doc with some mistrust, for they'd had numerous dealings with him before.

"Fine day, gents," Doc greeted cheerfully.

"It was," Loop said pointedly.

"Ain't in no swappin' mood," Puney said sourly. "Got to get this well dug before wet weather sets in."

Doc slid down from the wagon and waddled to the edge of the hole. Following, Luckless Lester fell out of the covered wagon and picked himself up with a resigned sigh.

"Sorry yuh boys ain't in a swappin' mood," Doc said unhappily. "Got a ole lamp shade yuh oughta have."

"Phooey!" Loop snorted. "We go to bed at dark. Ain't got no need for a lamp, let alone a—"

"Eee—oop—ump!" Luckless Lester gasped as he fell head over heels into Loop and Puney's unfinished well.

His head hit a shovel handle and snapped it in two. He closed his eyes, stretched out his long legs, and a peaceful look come to his seamy face.

"Good gravy!" Puney yelled. "He's busted his neck!"

One glance at Luckless Lester's face convinced Doc that the man was out only temporarily, but Doc was not one to miss an opportunity like this.

"A death trap!" he said. "Nothin' for me to do if I'm called into court but to say how yuh dug a well an' didn't put no fence around it, or no boards over it."

Loop and Puney exchanged frightened glances. Then Loop turned his attention to the prone man. He reached out a trembling hand and felt Luckless' limp wrist.

"Heart's beatin'," he said hoarsely.

"Concussion of the brain, likely," Doc muttered. "If yuh boys have to pay his hospital bill, it'll cost yuh a heap."

A sudden gleam of hope leaped into Puney's eyes.

"Doc," he said, "what did yuh say about a ole lamp shade? Mebbe if we could do some swappin'—"

"Why," Doc smiled, "this lamp shade'd shore brighten up yore home."

Loop and Puney gave each other a sly wink, and Puney allowed that the lamp shade was just what they needed. For it, Doc got an old lariat, a peck of potatoes, a fishing pole and the broken shovel to boot. By then, Luckless Lester was up and wondering what had happened.

"Why," Luckless mumbled as they went on, "would two ole coots like 'em want to purty up a house like theirs with a lamp shade?"

"Can't figure it out myself," Doc answered.

That evening they made camp at Doc's favorite spot on the right bank of Sugar Creek. As the old swapper put together a right appetizing supper of some of the things he'd traded for, he took inventory. Come to think of it, he reckoned he'd never done such fancy swapping before in his life, but he felt far from satisfied with the day's results. Of course, he had gotten rid of Polka Dot, but he hadn't found a way to bring Sheriff MacLoyd back to earth.

And then Doc lifted his head and saw something that made him cuss. Polka Dot, the meanest looking horse in the world, had slipped up unnoticed and was helping himself to some of the oats which Doc had brought along for his fat, sleek bays.

JUST as Doc reached for a club, there came the sound of a great splash from the creek, followed by Luckless Lester's

lusty call for help. Doc dropped the club, caught up the lariat and ran for the creek.

A shock of yellow hair, followed by a frightened bony face, broke the surface of the water.

"Help, Doc," Luckless choked. "Foot's caught—"

He went under; then came up again, gasping. Doc threw the lariat, and Luckless wrapped his big fingers about it.

When Doc pulled him to shore, he saw that the man's right foot was wedged firmly in a three gallon stone jar. Staring at the jar, Doc remembered that Bill Clink had had one similar to it stolen a few nights before.

"Lester," Doc said excitedly, "just set down so's yuh won't fall back into the creek."

Puffing like an overloaded donkey engine, the old swapper waddled to his wagon and returned pronto with the ball of twine, the fishhooks and the flatiron. Working deftly, he tied a batch of hooks to one end of the lariat along with the rusty old iron to act as a sinker.

With a little grunt, he heaved his queer fishing device into the creek at the point where Luckless had wedged his foot into Bill Clink's stone jar. On the second haul, Doc was rewarded by a set of old buggy harness. Next, he snagged Homer Prutt's cockroach exterminator, which had been weighted down with some rocks. Then he fished out an old cushion, which he recognized as belonging to Ad Trotter's rocking chair. By the time the sun had set, he had found all the articles which had been reported lost in and around Dry Bluffs. All except Big Jim Ferris' old saddle and gold watch.

"Two things I don't savvy," Doc muttered. "First, why'd the thief chuck this stuff into the creek. Second, why didn't we find Big Jim's saddle. Wouldn't likely to hook on a watch, but the saddle—"

Luckless Lester shook his dripping head. "I got no ideas a-tall, Doc," he said.

"Mebbe we ought to pay Big Jim a visit in the mornin'."

"I wouldn't know about that neither," Luckless sighed.

Working together, they loaded the water-soaked loot into Doc's covered wagon, and then ate their now cold suppers.

Bright and early the next morning, Doc and Luckless were on their way toward Big Jim Ferris' homestead. They hadn't gone a mile when Polka Dot showed up, grinning at them with his big yellow teeth.

Doc cussed and reached for the flatiron. Polka Dot kicked up his unshod heels and retreated.

Just as they came in sight of the Ferris log cabin, Luckless sat up straight and stared about.

"By kidney!" he exclaimed. "This place looks mighty familiar, Doc. In fact, the gent who lives here give me that ole saddle. Yuh see, that ornery hoss rolled on my other'n an' busted it all to heck. So this kind-hearted jasper—he's as big as a six-year ole bull—give me a saddle an' says—"

"Yuh mean Big Jim give yuh his ole saddle?" Doc wheezed.

"Didn't know his name, but he says, 'Don't tell nobody where at yuh got it.'"

"Dad-blast it!" Doc fumed. "Why don't yuh tell me things?"

Luckless sighed. "Didn't figure yuh'd be interested."

Doc pulled his bays up short. The Ferris cabin appeared deserted, all windows closed, the blinds drawn. He slid to the ground. Luckless fell out after him. Doc tried the cabin door and found it locked.

"Ain't nobody to home," he began.

Luckless Lester let out a squawk and grabbed up a rock.

"Look, Doc, a chicken hawk!" he wheezed, and let fly with the rock at a bird perched on the rail fence.

"That's just a stuffed chicken hawk that Jim put up there to scare."

The rest of Doc's words were lost in a crash of glass, for the rock took a window pane dead center. The window blind whirled upward, flapping wildly as the roller spun.

"Now yuh've done it," Doc said, stepping to the shattered window. "I reckon Big Jim'll wring yore neck."

LOOKING through the window, he saw something glittering on Big Jim's bunk. It was a watch. Gold!

Doc felt a trickle of sweat work through his left eyebrow and run into his left eye.

"Ain't no hand to make unlawful entry into a man's house," he mumbled as he waddled hurriedly back to his wagon.

A moment later, he returned to the

window with the fishing pole to which he'd fastened one of the large fishhooks. It was no trick at all for him to put the pole through the broken window and fish out the gold watch. The watch once in his fat fingers, he turned it over. Engraved on the back were the letters "JF."

"Somethin' here abouts smells like a dead rat," Doc growled. "Mebbe—"

A sudden commotion stopped him. Luckless Lester had tripped over a stick of stove wood.

As they drove along the trail, Doc reckoned he had things pretty well straight in his mind, but he couldn't figure out anything he could do about it. He had convictions a plenty, but no actual proof. And the more he tried to work out some plan of action, the more at a loss he became. He was so busy with his thoughts that he failed to notice Polka Dot trailing his wagon. As for Luckless Lester, he was watching an approaching horseman. This horseman had the biggest ears Luckless had ever seen on a man.

The rider drew up beside the wagon and bellowed, "Howdy, Doc." He was a nester by the name of Mule Turner.

"H'lo, Mule," Doc returned. "What's a-goin' on?"

"For one thing," Mule said grimly, "us citizens are goin' to take action about this stealin'. Like Big Jim says, we can't let a thief run loose, even if he don't steal nothin' valuable. I'm on my way to meet Jim an' some of the boys down by Injun Bluff. We're goin' to ride into Dry Bluffs an' tell MacLoyd it's time he was quittin'. We're fed up on havin' us a book writin' sheriff. Big Jim's got a petition with a lot of names on it, too."

It came to Doc then like a flash of lightning, the idea! He almost tumbled from the wagon seat as plans began to whiz around in his head.

"No use yuh goin' to town, Mule," he wheezed. "MacLoyd ain't there. He's campin' at the big bend in Sugar Creek. Yuh'd better tell Big Jim an' the others to go there."

"Thanks, Doc," Mule said. "I'll shore tell 'em."

Doc slapped the lines over his sleek bays and headed his outfit toward the creek. His blue eyes were bright with excitement.

"By kidney!" Luckless exclaimed. "That ornery Polka Dot's followin' us."

Doc blinked rapidly. Maybe Polka Dot would come in handy yet. He grinned behind his white whiskers.

They found Sheriff MacLoyd sitting at the folding table in front of his faded tent. His white hair was rumpled, and a harried expression haunted his bony face. He glanced up as Doc's wagon approached, and his scowl deepened.

As they drew near the tent, Doc whispered last minute instructions to Luckless Lester. Then, lifting his fancy Stetson, he called to MacLoyd, "How's the book comin'?"

MacLoyd sighed. "Doc, I ain't got no farther than the title yet. I may give up writin' for a time an look' into some of this stealin' people is yappin' about."

"Yuh're kinda late for that," Doc said flatly. "If yuh'll stand up an' look, yuh'll see a number of yore ole friends ridin' this way. It's a delegation that's comin' to ask yuh to resign as sheriff."

EYES popping, MacLoyd leaped to his feet.

"Doc," he bleated, "hide me some'ers!"

"Set down, yuh skinny ole fool, an' keep yore big mouth shut," Doc advised.

MacLoyd slumped back on the canvas stool. His eyes whipped wildly about. If he'd had the strength, he would have likely run like a dog with a can tied to his tail.

"Lester," Doc said calmly, "get busy."

Luckless Lester fell out of the wagon and headed for the timber with the old lariat over one arm.

MacLoyd was too worried to ask any questions about the stranger. His bugging pale eyes were fixed on the approaching delegation led by Big Jim Ferris, Ed Lunt, Puney and Loop Porter, Homer Prutt, Mule Turner, and a dozen others.

The men came to a halt before the tent. Big Jim did the talking, while the others stood about in stony silence.

"Sheriff," he said, "as spokesman for the voters of Bluff County, I wish to say we figure a book writin' sheriff is somethin' we ain't got no need for. Also, when a man reaches a certain age, it's time he stepped down an'—"

"Heh, heh," Doc chuckled. "Sheriff, why don't yuh tell these boys yuh ain't writin' a book? Tell 'em yuh've just been pretendin' so's to throw the thief off guard.

While yuh was pretendin', yuh was actually gatherin' evidence an' searchin' for the loot."

MacLoyd had just enough presence of mind to gurgle, "That's right, boys."

"Mebbe," Doc went on blandly, "yuh ought to tell 'em that yuh found the loot dumped in the creek an' loaded it in my wagon. Also, yuh should ought to tell 'em about the footprints the thief left on the creek bank an' how yuh made a exact copy of 'em on some of them sheets of paper. Yuh might mention, too, that the guilty hombre is a feller who's doin' all this just to get yore job."

MacLoyd and the others shot startled glances at Big Jim Ferris.

The giant-sized homesteader suddenly looked uneasy.

Doc went on, "Tell 'em all they have to do to get their stole property back is to step up an' let yuh measure their boots. They can do that as I hand out the stuff."

Doc climbed up into his wagon and lifted up the stone jar.

Bill Clink rushed forward eagerly to claim it; then went over to MacLoyd to have his boots measured.

Doc lifted up the worn saddle. At that moment, Luckless Lester stepped out from behind a tree. He pointed a long finger at Big Jim Ferris, and said, "Yuh give that saddle to me!"

Face pale, Big Jim shook his head vigorously. He looked rattled.

Doc held up the gold watch. "Ain't this the watch yuh had stole?"

"'Course not," Big Jim roared. "My watch's to home where—"

He stopped in sudden confusion and looked wildly about.

"Been wantin' to be sheriff, ain't yuh?" Doc said harshly. "Didn't steal nothing very valuable, because yuh figured if yuh took junk, the sheriff wouldn't be so apt to investigate. Yuh just took little things that would aggravate people, an' yuh dumped 'em in the creek so's yuh wouldn't get caught with 'em. I reckon yore footprints will match the ones MacLoyd found."

Big Jim Ferris waited to hear no more. He leaped into his saddle and spurred his horse toward the timber.

"Let him go," Doc said to the angry men. "I reckon he'll clear out of the valley pronto.

"Also," Doc went on, "I reckon yuh've all changed yore mind about wantin' a new sheriff?"

The men looked at each other sheepishly. They came around and shook hands with the somewhat flabbergasted sheriff, then rode away towards their various homes.

AFTER the last man had gone, MacLoyd said, "Doc, I feel mighty grateful to yuh. Never again will I call yuh a fat ole goat, or a—"

Doc felt a sinking sensation hit him. MacLoyd, he realized, still was not his former self. And then he remembered Polka Dot!

"Want to swap them pencils an' paper for somethin' unsight-unseen?" he asked.

"Anything yuh say, Doc. Yuh're my very dear friend."

"Lester," Doc bellowed, "bring Polka Dot for the sheriff."

Luckless Lester came leading Polka Dot from among the trees.

"He's all yores, Sheriff," Doc said as he began to gather up the paper and pencils.

MacLoyd's eyes bugged. He swallowed half his cud and leaped to his feet.

"Doc," he roared, "yuh fat ole goat, I wouldn't be caught dead ownin' a hoss like that!"

"Yuh swapped for him," Doc reminded happily.

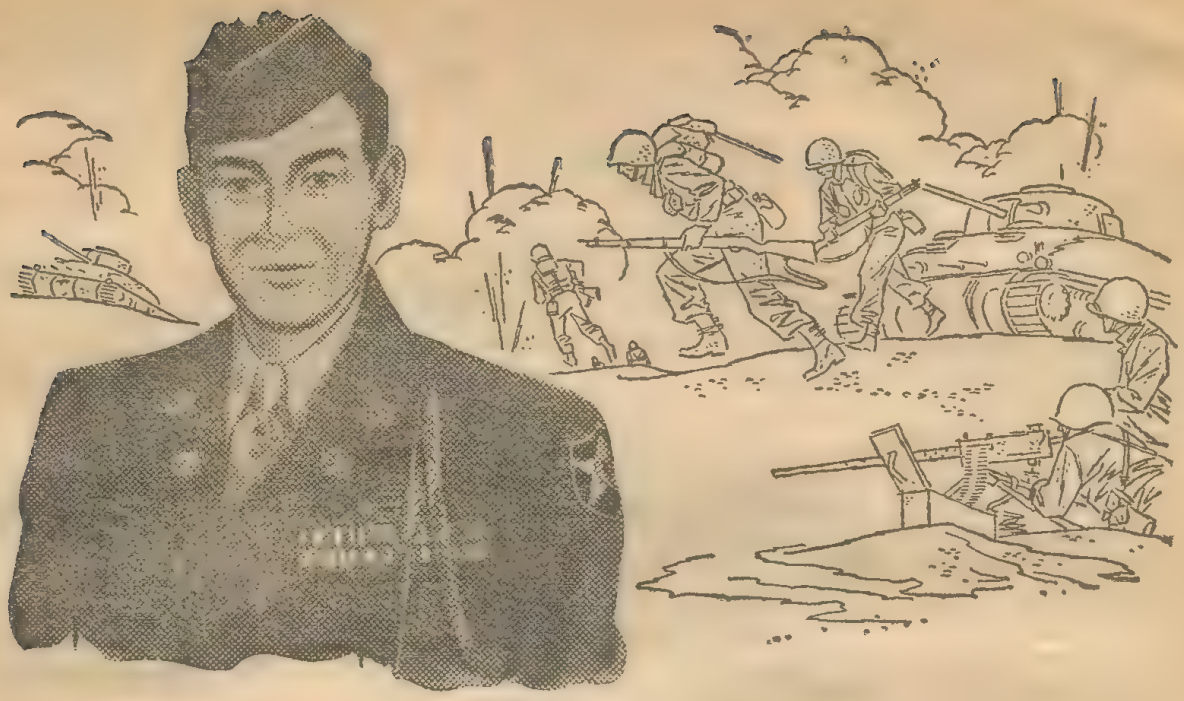
MacLoyd stamped his feet and turned the air blue.

"Of course," Doc went on mildly, "yuh might give him to Luckless Lester as a reward for finding all that stuff in Sugar Creek."

The sheriff's cuss words music to his ears, Doc climbed up to the sagging spring seat of his covered wagon and drove away. At the top of a hill, he looked back. Luckless Lester was riding away on Polka Dot, no doubt headed for home where luck was more kind to him. As for MacLoyd, he stood by the flapping tent, shaking a bony fist in Doc's direction.

Doc began to whistle. Besides doing a lot of fancy swapping, he'd gotten his old crony out of a pretty bad jam and solved a mystery to boot. But better than this, he'd brought MacLoyd back to earth. Doc's whistling grew merry.

He couldn't remember the day when he felt happier.



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THE SHORT STRAWS

By JOHNSTON CARROLL

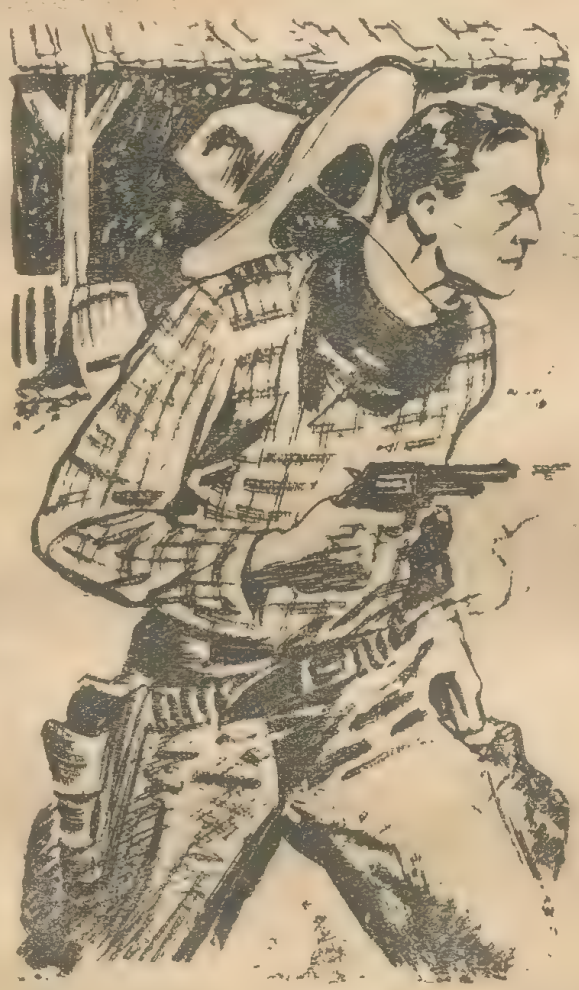
JAKE BRAILLE sat alone at the long table in the Diamond T bunkhouse and wearily turned cards from a worn deck in a game of solitaire.

"Saturday night," he mused aloud, "and I got to go draw me a short straw again!" He shook his head. "Anyhow, it was long enough to beat Shorty and Tod out of nighthawk duty."

He mussed up the solitaire spread and stood up and stretched, then. A lanky man with a craggy face and hair as black as soot, Braille would have been considered a top hand on any cattle outfit in the West. He could rope and ride with the best of them, and he could shoot too, if it came to that.

He took his hat from the table and went to the doorway, one hand fumbling for tobacco and papers in his shirt pocket. Even the Old Man had gone to town this Saturday night so that the ranchhouse lay squat and dark as the other buildings, with only the roofs limned sharply against the bright prairie starshine.

Jake began to put together a smoke when suddenly he paused, hearing the staccato beat of fast-coming hoofs cleave the night. One of the boys drifting back from town, he thought, and then abruptly dropped the cigarette he was making and turned back into the bunkhouse.



Braille fired at the muzzle flash

Was it one of the boys drifting back, he would be doing just that—drifting. He wouldn't be coming in hell-for-leather like this dude was, as though his very life depended upon the speed of his horse.

Braille lifted his guns from the wall peg beside his bunk and swiftly buckled them on. He was at the table in a couple of long strides, turning the lamp down, blowing it out. Then he stepped to the door once more.

The horse swept into the yard, sharply breaking gait as it slowed.

"Jake! Jake!" The falsetto pitch of the voice was unmistakably that of old Tod Campbell.

Jake Braille left the bunkhouse on the run. He caught the bridle of the big roan Campbell was riding just as it came to a slewing halt, then caught the wiry old man who lurched from the saddle.

"Jake, where are yuh?" Campbell cried hysterically, growing limp in Braille's arms.

Braille's right there when rustlers raid the Diamond T!

"Easy, old-timer," said Braille. "I'm right here with yuh." He lowered Campbell gently to the ground. "What's up, anyway?"

"Rustlers!" Tod Campbell gasped. "They got Shorty. They're takin' the herd. And next thing, some of 'em'll be here after that blooded stuff in the big corral. Turn 'em out, Jake, and stampede 'em with a few shots. They'll never round 'em up in the brush hereabouts, dark as it is. You—"

THE old man broke off in a fit of coughing.

"Easy does it, Tod," Braille said quietly. "I'll handle things, don't do no more worryin' about it."

"No!" Campbell moaned. "This ain't no time to be a danged hero. Yuh do like I say. Turn out the blooded stuff and scatter 'em, then hightail to town for the boys. They're too many for yuh. They won't give yuh no more chance'n they did me and Shorty. Git now!"

"But you—" Braille started to say, then paused as the old man began to cough again. When Campbell finished, his legs kicking convulsively before he lay still, Braille knew the oldster would never hear what he had to say. He would never again hear what anyone on this earth had to say.

Braille looked down at the man, sweat and blood agleam on his face in the starlight, and he swore softly. Tod Campbell had been particularly close to him, and Shorty had been a friend, too.

It could have been me, he thought. You just drew shorter straws, is all.

"But rest easy, boys," he muttered. "Them that did it will pay, don't trouble yoreselves about that. If it's the last thing I do alive, I'll see they pay, and pay plenty."

He thought of the blooded stock in the big corral then and whirled. But even as he did so, he heard the muted sound of riders stealthily approaching. And then he made out dark figures against the night, moving into the yard at the far side.

A wedge of flame leaped from their midst and Braille felt a bullet pluck at a loose fold of his shirt. Almost magically then, his right-hand gun was out and firing at the muzzle flash. A man screamed hoarsely, but Braille did not see him fall. Already he was headed for the shelter of the bunkhouse, doubled over, in a crazy, weaving, zigzagging run.

He heard bullets swish past him to rattle against the wall. Then, knowing they would be laying a curtain of fire over the dark aperture which was the doorway, he dived through the open front window of the bunkhouse.

Braille pushed shut the door, leaving just enough of an opening to fire through. He shot rapidly, aiming at the bunched mass of riders, and fired until his gun was empty. Then he stepped back away from the spot and smiled grimly at the fusillade of bullets that pelted the door.

A heavy box caught his eye. He upended it against a corner of the window and crouched behind it. Maybe I can keep 'em busy until some of the boys get back, he thought, and save the Old Man's blooded stuff after all.

He loaded his empty right-hand gun and peered cautiously around the box that now shielded a corner of the window.

"Let him be!" someone sang out. "All we want is those beefs in the corral, and the quicker we chouse 'em out of there the better."

Braille could see the gate of the corral plainly in the starlight. But it was at long range for six-guns. He turned abruptly and got his Winchester from its boot below his bunk, then returned to the window, pushing long shells into the magazine. Levering a shell into the breech, he rested the barrel on the window sill and further braced it against the box. Then he drew down on the spot where he knew the gate toggle of the corral to be.

When he saw the dark form of a man slip from saddle and come into the sights to get at the toggle, Braille carefully squeezed the trigger. The muzzle bloom of the Winchester blinded him for a moment, but when he could see again, he made out the dark shadow the man made against the ground by the foot of the gate.

"He's pickin' us off like flies!" a voice cried. "We got to get him out of the way first, Red, 'fore we can move this stuff."

"All right, get him then," replied a gruff voice. "Smoke him out if yuh have to!"

Well, it wouldn't be long now, Braille thought wryly. He was keeping 'em busy, anyway, and he'd take some more of the dirty sidewinders with him when he went.

He saw the rustlers deploy and begin to inch in on foot. He shot the Winchester once more. He fired through the door crack at an approaching form and saw the man straighten and fall silently. Then he was back at the window, and it was a job for six-guns again.

HE SNAPPED a couple of quick shots at a shadow that loomed close against the bunkhouse wall, but saw the shadow skip around the corner and knew he'd missed. He'd seen something else in the flash from his guns that caused him to pause, however. Red letters on the box he'd propped in the window.

Dynamite! He'd been using a box of dynamite for protection!

It was when he saw the flickering reflection of flames on the ground, as the rustlers pitched ignited hay onto the roof from the side of the bunkhouse, that the idea occurred to Braille. Smoke him out, would they? His lips quirked in a sardonic grin.

He quickly procured the box of dynamite caps from atop the rafter at the far end of the bunkhouse. Then, ripping apart a straw tick from one of the vacant bunks, he set the caps on a mound of dry straw against the base of the dynamite box.

The roof was going fast and already streamers of fire were falling through to the bunkhouse floor. Braille waited until he saw one of them set fire to the pile of dry straw before he pulled open the door and hurtled out into the night. Shots buzzed all around him, but there was no pausing to return them now. Braille was digging out of there—running for his life.

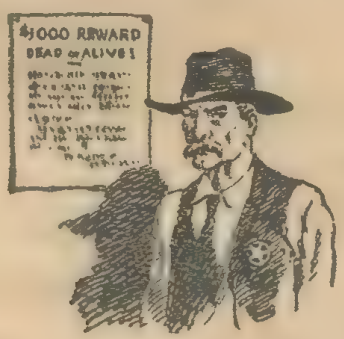
It was as though a great hand smote him from behind. The blast lifted him from the ground and hurled him perhaps a dozen feet forward to bring up on his face in the hard-packed dirt of the ranch yard.

He lay there for a moment, dazed. Then he sat up and looked at where the bunkhouse had been, with the rustlers gathered close around in their attempt to tally him so that they could get the stock out of the corral unmolested. Only a flattened, twisted ruin remained, and save for smoke which eddied slowly into the night sky, not a thing stirred.

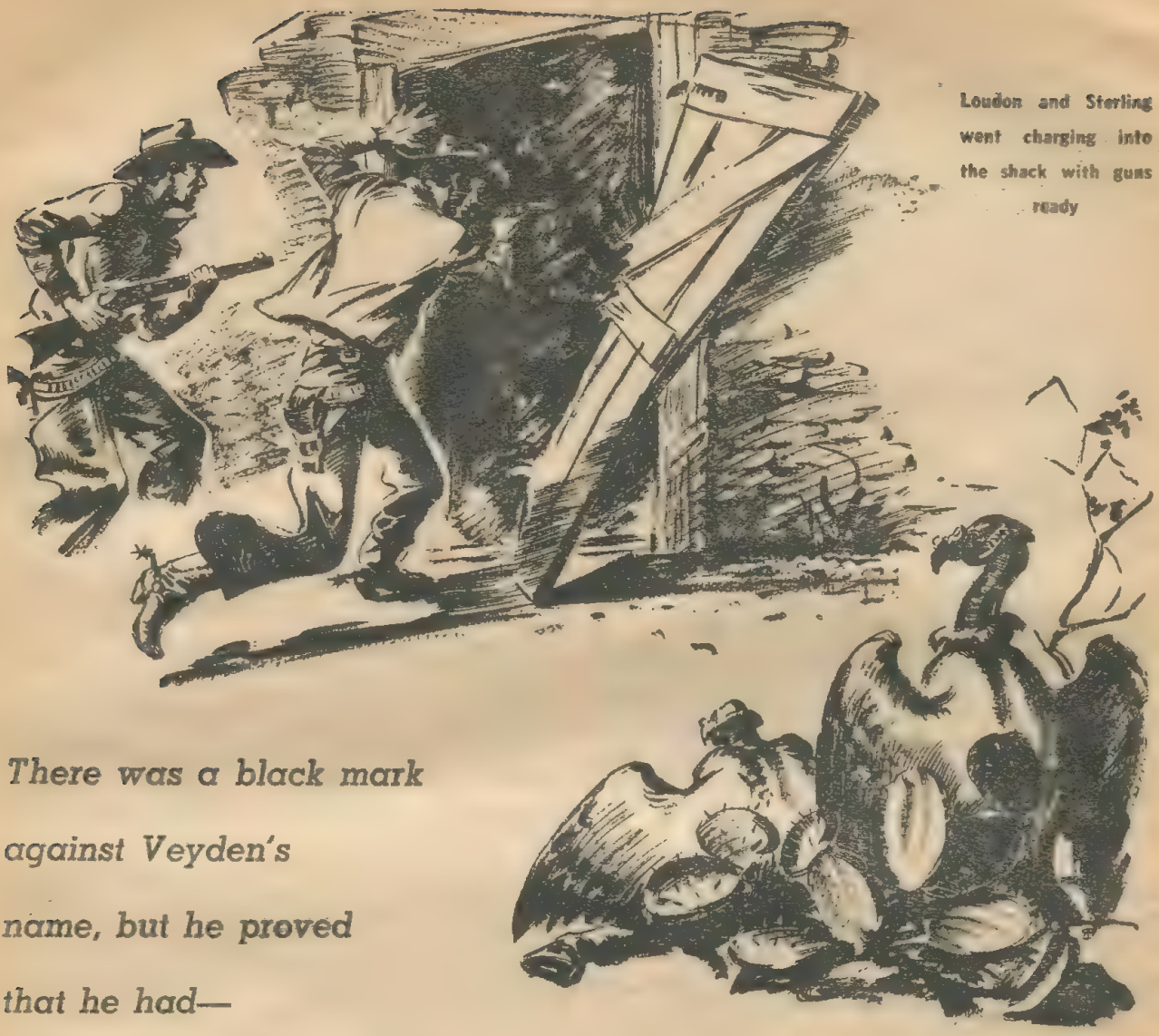
He smiled grimly then, as suddenly he was remembering that it had been Tod Campbell and Shorty who had only that morning hauled the box of dynamite out from town to use in clearing some of the waterholes on the South range. And it had been Tod, the crew's dynamiter, who'd said there wasn't any danger in storing it in the bunkhouse so long as you kept the sticks and caps separated.

Braille spat dirt out of his mouth, and spat again. Then he took a shortened broomstraw from his shirt pocket and began to pick sand from between his front teeth with it.

"Anyhow, Tod," he said, looking toward the dark mound of the old man's body, "it was a day for the short straws."



Even with one leg inside those pearly gates, the tradin' hombre still hankers after Sheriff MacLoyd's mule, and he's just as stubborn as the critter—in DOC SWAP'S CONVALESCENCE, a laugh-packed story by BEN FRANK coming in next month's issue!



Loudon and Sterling went charging into the shack with guns ready

There was a black mark against Veyden's name, but he proved that he had—

Good Ranger Blood

CAPTAIN Sam Loudon of the Mesquite Camp rangers stood on the Buffalo county court steps, cornered by three local reporters and a traveling correspondent. He had just obtained the conviction of three men who had been running off other men's horses. Two more of the rustlers had been buried some weeks previously when the gang was broken up.

The traveling correspondent had telegraphed the capture story back north. The captain pretended not to like the publicity. He had cussed the out-yonder newspaper man, who was a stranger to the ways and ideas of wizened little men 10% of whose weight consisted of short guns in big holsters hung to cartridge belts with long rifle shells and double rows of 45-caliber ammunition.

"By the way, Cap'n!" the pilgrim cut in while the ranger breathed. "You had a ranger who disappeared—Mark Veyden was it? Just what happened?"

By RAYMOND S. SPEARS

Captain Loudon bristled, his face drew taut, and the three local newspaper men backed up. Only an outsider would have asked that question. But, of course, being a ranger captain, the Lone Star peace officer restrained himself. He turned his back and dog-trotted over to the livery where he'd put up his horse while finishing the job against the horsethief gang. A little man on a tall, lanky horse, the ranger rode away, kicking up the dust.

The three local reporters explained to the traveling correspondent about Capt. Loudon's prowess, and peppery temper. Nobody ever mentioned Mark Veyden to Captain Loudon. The subject was a painful one.

That night, Captain Loudon sat alone in an abandoned stone cabin gnawing venison jerky and eating cold baked beans, gulping down occasional swallows of hot coffee. He was half way from Buffalo Court to the Mesquite Camp of his ranger troop. His domain was about 25,000 square miles of Texas, bounded on the south by the Rio Grande and a population of five or six thousand, largely unstable. Hissing and grumbling, in spite of himself, recollection of Mark Veyden kept coming back.

Veyden had come to Captain Loudon, applying for a ranger appointment. Veyden had been a peaceable civilian in Oro Track, married and had a boy. Some bad actors had come to town and when they were fair warned by City Marshal Curzan to behave, one got behind him and pistol whipped him. Veyden had interfered and killed one of the rowdies. He refused to take Curzan's job when the city marshal resigned.

Then two of the toughs came looking for Veyden. Fortunately, Veyden had taken to packing a gun, just in case. In a fair stand up shoot out, Veyden killed one of the trouble-hunters and the other was hospitalized. This provoked the rough element, so Veyden applied for and got a ranger appointment. He had qualified as marksman, nerve, legality—success.

VEYDEN lasted nearly two years. He did what he was told. He kept his mouth shut, and even while testifying on the witness stand, he used the fewest words with the most meaning. He was a one-man parade, preserving the peace at celebrations. Even sheriffs liked him because he backed them up. Captain Loudon felt he was almost too good to be real. Modest, backward, shy, Veyden listened into all kinds of privacies.

Several serious robberies indicated a gang operating out around. Captain Loudon sent Ranger Mark Veyden out scouting, trying to locate the bandits in their rendezvous. Veyden was gone a week.

"No luck!" he reported to the captain, and he went looking for a rewarded scoundrel come to hide out from Cobrette, trading center for the Tuckso mountain country ranches.

Three days after Ranger Veyden took off with a week's supply of grub, ammunition and a camping outfit, five men rode into Cobrette. Three swung down at the bank tie-rail while two held horses and took over main street. Somebody noticed the two were masked, one with black the other with red. Two shots in the bank showed the gang meant business.

The bank had just received a gold coin shipment to meet the autumnal beef sales requirements and a special ranch-sale gold payment. The coins were all in canvas bags, clear white with Clearance Bank black-ink printing. The three men came staggering out of the Cobrette bank, with armfuls of those white bags. Saddlebags on all five horses were jammed with the bags and the five desperadoes rode away, their horses fairly staggering with the extra weight in bags of gold coin.

This was such a serious robbery that Captain Loudon led the rangers into town. Nobody would talk authoritatively about how much was taken, but it was plenty, yes, indeed! This was the first robbery since Captain Loudon was promoted.

"Now what'd you see?" the captain demanded of each eye-witness. Three women were the best observers. They named three horses as having blotted brands. Two were a Horse-Shoe Triangle and a 4-Dot Circle. The three women all agreed regarding the clothes of the bandits. They named their hats, chaps, shirts, two short bob-tailed jackets, three leather and two goatskin chaps, and they even specified the saddles, two pretty ones with pearl and silver ornaments. Moreover, two riders had black hair, two kind of yellow, and one was right red, close to coppery.

Captain Loudon carefully sorted out the descriptions—a tall robber, two small, like heavy jockeys, and a stocky, square built man. Then there was a fancy horseman, straight-backed—kind of a rodeo performer, cool, calm and a show-off. And there loomed the description of Mark Veyden, 155 pounds, five feet eleven inches tall, blue woolen shirt, oak-tan chaps and a Pendleton utility saddle. Captain Loudon wrote it all down, each man separate, but naming no name.

Captain Loudon spread the descriptions without comment. He rode the fresh, dusty tracks of the five raiders out deep into his own domain. He spread his men hither and yon in angry vehemence. Presently he had sarcastic, insinuating, inquiring despatches from those cedar belt authorities who knew more about mud than dust.

For days and weeks, and in fact for going on ten years Captain Loudon spent more time thinking about Mark Veyden than about any ten or fifteen notable rascals with whom he sought official contacts. First and last, the captain was made positively sick, thinking about Mark Veyden and that robber who tallied exactly with Mark Veyden's description, even to his horse.

Veyden's horse was a tall, long-legged, narrow breasted blue gray Four-Dot-Circle brand. Captain Loudon first and last admired that animal. Northern bred and grown, it could have been ridden south to Texas by a Texas boy coming home, or a rider seeking a climate to fit his clothes, or an outlaw hunting southward along the Old Thief Trail from Milk River basin to the Rio Grande instead of through Alma into Chihuahua.

"Blast a man who'll give a horse-brand a bad name!" Captain Loudon told himself. "They must like the Four-Dot Circle to ride south!"

When Mark Veyden didn't return from his assignment down near the Rio Grande, rangers began to look over the dodger describing the Cobrette bank robbers. And there was the description, right down to the Four-Dot-Circle, a big blue-gray—thick-haired, too, a northern characteristic, for a finishing touch.

ON HIS annual inspection, Major Durkind visited Mesquite Camp, and enjoyed roasted young wild razorback, beans, hotbread, wild honey, coffee, corn pone, a roast wild goose one of the boys popped flying over opportunely. Every thing went off in grand style.

"By the way, Cap'n," Major Durkind inquired casually, "what became of Mark Veyden?"

There it was. Captain Loudon looked away for a long moment. He shook his head, sighed, confessed:

"Danged if I know!"

Captain Loudon's answer became a byword among the rangers even into the East Texas and Salt Grass territories as well as across the Staked Plains, Upper Red river, and out around the Mesquite Camp domain, where the rangers were known as the Danged If I Know, kind of a nick-name.

The years little abated Captain Loudon's great shame, disappointment and anger. When the rangers of West Texas had a roundup of as many as could be spared from the camps, somebody was bound to mention Mark Veyden as if it made any difference what had become of him, or why, or how.

True, every last ranger kept an ear cocked, listening for a hint about what had become of that scoundrel who had added ill-fame to the name of rangers for violence in behalf of the law. No outsider ever mentioned Mark Veyden's name twice to a ranger. Sheriffs, deputies, U.S. deputy marshals—all those city, county and other-state officials just better not have any curiosity as regards a private, occupational, personal Texas Ranger matter, no, indeed!

Then from Austin, Ranger Headquarters, countersigned by everybody from the major in command on up, came an official document, sealed and stamped with Lone Star authority, which appointed Mark Veyden to be a Texas Ranger. And accompanying was an order that assigned Mark Veyden to the Mesquite Camp, Captain Sam Loudon, commanding.

This new appointee rode into Mesquite Camp fully equipped according to rules and regulations. His rifle was new, a star gauge targeter. His belt was looped half for 303s, and half for 45-S&Ws. He wore a big Colt on the right and a big S&W on the left. He was riding a steel blue horse

with a small brand carefully blotted, but when the light was right one could see four dots and a faint circle around them.

The rider sat his horse like a man does who learned very young, bare-backed on calves and yearlings. He was just a blue-eyed, hard-faced, self-confident youth—asking no questions and come to stay, yet just as respectful as a good ranger can be to temporary, limited, efficient authority.

Field captains of the rangers had made mistakes in their appointments. Their coming and going made clerical work at the capital headquarters, and now and then when it seemed a good idea, or good politics, or perhaps a warning to rambunctious lieutenants and captains, men had been given appointments—perhaps just to get rid of them or placate their sponsors. Here was such a test of Captain Sam Loudon's patience as he never before had endured. In fact, Mark Veyden was the first ranger Captain Loudon had ever had wished on him without his approval first.

There stood Mark Veyden, tall, slim, straight up and down, at attention, his gaze straight, too, a little on the down slant for he was much taller than the captain.

"Mark Veyden's son?" Loudon demanded.

"Yes, sir."

"Where've you been, these yeahs?"

"Up north—Dakotahs—Montany."

"What doin'?"

"Ridin'."

"Brandin' calves, ridin' horses better men broke, trail-herdin' muley whitefaces—" Loudon was furious, scornful "—shootin' rabbits, practisin'—" Loudon's voice snarled "—to be a *Texas* ranger!"

"I practised—rode—" the youth admitted.

"How come you got 'pointed to be a ranger?" Loudon grimaced, adding, "Anotheh Mark Veyden!"

"I drove down a band of Texas brand horses," the youth answered, and then added hesitating words, "Horses you rangers let get took away, *suh!* Sixty-eight head. I rode my uncle's brand—Four-Dot Circle, suh."

THIS was talking back. Captain Loudon snapped his jaws shut, audibly. He had bumped into something more solid than a 'dobe wall.

"You're talking," the ranger captain said. "Talk that got credentials at Austin, I notice."

"I had papers," the new recruit explained, patiently. "I was peace-officer in Powder River county—deputy sheriff. I showed the major at Austin headquarters three burial certificates—those three fellers that herded yore Texas horses up acrost the Wyoming line. I'm Texas borned, Captain Loudon."

"Yeah—and Mark Veyden's son!" Captain Loudon jeered.

"Yes, sir!" the youth declared hotly. "I heard yore talk clear to Montany. My name is good, Cap'n. If'n you're just an old gossip, all right—don't talk to me. If'n you're a ranger captain, I'm yore man."

A slow, thin-lipped grin broadened out above the doughty captain's deeply cleft chin. His thought hadn't been to test the recruit's nerve, but just to put him in his proper place—considering his name. Not in many a day had any one talked up to him. Now a fresh kid had sassed him—and given him a cold-shower bath sensation.

"Eh, Kindell—take this kid over to the A-Bell outfit about those last calves they reported," the captain ordered and so began the special Texas ranger procedure with a new recruit.

A recruit has to learn the Texas Ranger way of doing things. The force has its view-point, and the individual ranger looks into affairs according to that approach. No two occasions are alike. Circumstances determine whether a ranger starts action or leaves it to the other fellow to set the pace.

This boy, Mark Veyden, acted up right, and Kindell came back with praise for the youngster.

"Good tracker," the old ranger remarked. "Recognized Paul Wizzy's horse by the tracks. Paul'd been maverickin'. He's Mark's prisoner, now, over at Linkden Court. Paul's pleadin' guilty—hopin' to get off light."

"His pap looked good, too, till he hit the wrong trail," Captain Loudon grunted. Nevertheless, despite the questionable strain, Loudon put the boy strictly on his own. Many a dirty egg has hatched out well, the captain remarked, adding that

even double-yolkers never grew identical chicks.

Mark Veyden, Second, had been riding for the Mesquite rangers nearly a year. Nothing big had come his way, but he had been sent out alone on whatever business it was his turn to take. He had gone after chicken thieves, trouble makers, petty larcenists, fighting drunks and assaulters and he had the luck to pick up an Oklahoma fugitive with a record for violence, robbery and horse stealing, Relias Puddle, so-called. Puddle himself said he thought the kid was just showing off till he drew his gun.

"I hadn't even found my gun when that muzzle was aimed at my vest." Puddle shook his head. "Kids are fast and limber when they got the nerve. I never was arrested no neater in my life!"

Captain Loudon had chances to call Mark on the carpet two or three times, and took advantage of it, in dressing the youngster down. Mark took the tongue-lashing, hot-headed, but self-controlled. Boy-like, Mark had showed off, and instead of shooting plumb center, he'd shot the gun out of Phil Dabney's hand.

"S'posen you'd missed that gun?" Captain Loudon demanded, "I'd have had the bother of breakin' in a new ranger. Dabney's bad— You knew it?"

"Yas-suh," the boy admitted. "Bad—but slow. Wounded, he'd been mean to handle, fifteen miles from a wagon road. I spoiled a good gun."

That answer stopped Captain Loudon before he was more than started. The boy had showed ranger sense, so-called. Nevertheless, Captain Loudon always thought of the youngster's father who had looked good and had grown better till he rode away and kept rendezvous with robbers whose latest raid had added $60,000 or so to takes already cached.

Those outlaws hadn't blown their takes in riotous livings. They had taken gold enough to supply each one with the makings of a ranch, the establishment of a business—out yonder, somewhere. They were shrewd enough to plant one of their men in the ranger troop covering the field of their operations.

Now they were all gone—straight up, leaving no trace! Vanishing with them—Captain Loudon always thought, seeing that youth—was the father of that quiet, cold-blooded, thoroughly efficient son.

Captain Sam Loudon had his bad, mean, resentful days, the same as everybody else. Big, dangerous, gun-play excitements were give and take, and were what made a ranger job worth having, no matter what the end might be. What worried and exasperated a man was some tricky no-account proposition that got a man teased or laughed at—something hot but which had to be handled. And this kid Mark Veyden was like that. No matter what he was sent to do, he did it with a flip and a slam, so kind of easy-like that it verged on impudence, as if he were asking Captain Loudon whether he called such stuff rangering.

NO MATTER how a ranger acted, if he turned in a clean record of things done, no skips and no over-doings, he couldn't be called down. A goodly proportion of the rangers were there because a man had to be good to get on and to stay on. Mostly, the boys liked the high wages. But in every troop there were riders showing off, proving how good they were, and some had ulterior motives. Captain Loudon couldn't make up his mind whether Mark Veyden's boy was showing off, or living down his father's name, or was just being a ranger to prove that he could be.

None of the rangers, from Captain Loudon through the seven men who saw it, would ever forget the day the youngster brought in Piute Deckhard, a bad mean, raiding scoundrel from above Red River. Deckhard had killed nine men of record, two deputy marshals and a ranger among them. The scoundrel was faster than most on the draw—short or long guns. If he had it in for any one, he'd ambush him—and no peace-officer had ever proved those assassinations against him.

Mark Veyden led Deckhard's horse into Mesquite camp, slipped the latigo knots and flopped that outlaw's dead body onto the ground right at Captain Loudon's feet, and left him there unexplained while Mark took off the saddles and staked out the two horses, as if he'd just delivered miscellaneous grub in a two-bushel wheat or feed bag.

Captain Loudon sure hated to show his curiosity, but Ranger Veyden had him. All there was to it, Mark had figured

Deckhard was waylaying him so he still-hunted the up-side of the road and surprised the bushwhacker by "Hands Up" from behind. Deckhard swung his shotgun muzzle around, but of course, Veyden got him. The captain talked to himself, instead of to that insolent youngster, who was a good Danged If I Know.

Always in the range of a patrol troop there is at least one area that is bad medicine. Down away from everywhere, a bit back from the Rio Grande was the Thickety Patch, broken land, chaparral, land of tanglefoot, blind canyons, deceptive jump-offs—where even the wild hogs get lost and come out awry-eyed, according to rangers.

One night, sitting around a bonfire, Captain Loudon and five or six men were chinning. Mark Veyden listened, as usual, acting as if he didn't know a thing worth exposing to that critical group. Any other youngster would have been approved, even admired, for his reticence, but not Mark Veyden's boy, Mark II. He never explained how he operated doing things old timers would have bragged up.

"Down east and south," the youth spoke up, "theh's a rough—ifn you get into it seems like you cain't even back out up. No traces—nothin' but hog runways—fifteen-twenty thousand acres, looks like."

"Yeah," Captain Loudon answered, drawling. "They call it Mark Veyden's Thickety. Covered his tracks—theh!"

For once, Captain Loudon roped and threw Mark Veyden. The youngster, growing up in Montana, had never heard the details of his father's keeping rendezvous with the robbers of the Cobrette bank. Now he knew the complete story.

"How come, Cap'n?" the son asked when he had his breath. "How come?"

"I figured he was one of the gang 'pointed to ride with the rangers," Captain Loudon answered, bluntly. "The gang neveh spent its loot. They always knowed when to hit and where."

To that charge Mark Veyden's son could make no answer and he refrained from making any comment—as usual. Nevertheless, his face turned from the light of the fire, yet it shone pearly white in the red glow. He knew, now, what he had been up against riding under Captain Loudon and being side-kick to those rangers. No matter what his father had been, spy of robbers in a ranger camp, deserter with the gang that had made its getaway in Mark Veyden's Thickety Patch, Loudon and troop had let him make his own place.

The men turned into their bunks under the tents, Mark in the furthest one in the row, alone. The curiosity was whether he had been enlightened or exposed—his expression hadn't showed what was on his mind, and in the morning when they all ate standing up at the plank table, they acted the same as usual, expressions blank, minds unrevealed.

During the next three days Captain Loudon sent out men as they came up in line seriatim. It came Mark Veyden's turn—assault with a deadly weapon and intent to kill; ranger requested by Sheriff Dulkade. It was just routine work but one never knew when some trifle would develop into one of the cases which rangers make famous, or when it would be surprising, different.

THUS it happened that when three men stopped the Salt Grass Express on the grade east of Cobrette and picked up three express packages of currency going to banks, Mark Veyden got the word within an hour. At dawn he was on the trail of three horsemen who headed southwest and led the way into Mark Veyden's Thickety Patch.

The second day story of robbery mentioned "the coincidence" that Ranger Mark Veyden was pursuing the bandits, just as another Ranger Mark Veyden had pursued the five Cobrette bank robbers more than ten years before, as old-timers recalled. On the third day, it was made known by newspapers that Ranger Mark Veyden's son Mark was heading into the Thickety where the father had vanished—leaving a cloud of suspicion.

Captain Loudon took the word of train robbery from Cobrette and in the morning he faced his assignment register, hesitating. It came hard to write, but grimly Captain Loudon took the chance:

Cobrette train robbery—3 desperadoes—Ranger Mark Veyden took trail at daybreak—in charge.

In charge of the Cobrette bank robbery investigation had been Mark Veyden. Captain Loudon fought the suspicion but

remembered the way the holdup was done. The robbers had come down from the Little Rockies, the Hole-in-the-Wall, and from Robbers Roost—it was a northern gang. The raid had been done differently. Men from along the border operated in other ways.

"That pestiferous kid!" Captain Loudon snarled. "Learned to ride up in Montanny, eh? But I notice he rides a double-cinch rig, same as us."

Short-handed, as usual, Captain Loudon was held in the Mesquite Camp three days before he could leave a man on the wire in charge. Then he arrived in Cobrette with Knick Sterling, his best tracker. He found a sheriff, some deputies, cowboy detectives and would-be outlaw trailers, fighters, killers.

Loudon verified details and a local deputy sheriff took him out to where the three outlaws had "scattered." There was the track of Ranger Mark Veyden heading alone down the long grade into the Thickety Patch that had covered his father's tracks. Loudon thanked the deputy and sent him back.

"I don't want anybody but a ranger along," Loudon told Ranger Sterling. "Blast those Veydens!"

The youngster had stuck to the bandit's tracks. Winding through clusters of thicket, the follow-up rangers came to the tangles of cactuses, mesquite, chaparral, brush of claws, spines, tall weeds and low canopy. And there was the yellow slash of a chopping blade—the fresh blaze of somebody's cut. On beyond was another. Then a third, showing the way a man had gone through an aisle in the thickety—a blazed trace! A yellow slash in the purplish grey of gnarly trunks of stunted trees and cutting into the green of cactus stubs.

"The kid always carried a heavy knife," Sterling remarked.

"Seems like I'd noticed," Captain Loudon admitted.

The youthful ranger was sticking to the trail of one train robber. After all, there was a way into the big thickety. Here and there Captain Loudon and Ranger Nick Sterling saw that Mark's horse tracks were stepping in the hoof-prints of the bandit's mount.

"Looks like he knowed the way in!" Sterling remarked, uneasily.

"I neveh mistrusted but one ranger," the captain declared. "I got to be shown before I'll doubt two of 'em!"

Then they pitched down a steep grade into a flat canyon bottom. There was a trickle of water and a wet layer of shingle where dribbles of spring runs seeped down to the layer of stone over which a skim of water rippled. That rock bottom had taken the scratches of horseshoe calks.

So the two rangers came to a grassy flat. Up against the side wall of the canyon was a stone cabin. The horse that Ranger Mark Veyden had ridden was lying just clear of the dry jungle—saddle and bridle on it and two buzzards beginning to work the hide off.

Three horses were grazing, dragging their reins. Captain Loudon and Ranger Sterling stayed back out of sight, leaning and squinting, getting a line on that strange outfit. They edged along, back out of sight till they could look down onto the cabin.

There was sprawled a man, a rifle under his stiff hand. Then they saw another man, just behind the corner of that hideout. They searched for two more, but all they found were the bones of a man, his skull, a rusty 30-30 carbine, and debris of a human who had died on that spot.

CAPTAIN Loudon, never very patient, headed down to the back of the cabin, circled to the corner, stepped over the dead man there, and charged into the open doorway, with gun ready, sidestepping into the gloom.

"Howdy, Cap'n," a weak voice greeted him. "I figured you'd be tracking me in. This feller, here, needs—needs first-aiding!"

The young ranger had overtaken the three train robbers and killed two of them. The third one he had wounded, despite his own three bullet holes. He had blazed the trail through the chaparral thicket, knowing no ranger would miss those slashes with his chopping blade. Now that Captain Loudon and Nick Sterling had arrived, he sighed with content, giving up his own responsibility over to stalwart hands.

Having made the youngster as comfortable as could be, the ranger captain left Nick in the cabin while he searched

around that small acreage of bottom grass pasture. He caught the horses and took off their rigging. He went searching about, then, carefully examining first that rusty 30-30 carbine, the dry, white, crumbly bones of a man.

A gold watch, a finger ring, metal from a leather belt—Captain Loudon circled out around. He found five other remnants of humans, and there were big revolvers with shells rusted in the cylinders—some discharged, some loaded.

There were the bones of horses—leg, hip, back and head bones. And where the horses had died were bits of rigging metal, scatterings of coins, stained by alkali, drainings from decaying vegetation. Captain Loudon scraped these coins together into heaps. When he had finished ransacking that hidden pasturage and stacked up the human waste debris, he carried two old revolvers and an old rifle to the cabin, a man's skull balanced in the hook of his left elbow.

"Mark!" he said to the wounded youth lying on his back in the long bunk on his own saddle blanket. "Here's what's left of yore dad. He took those five Cobrette bank robbers with him. I reckon the gold money's all theh—I ain't bothered to count hit."

"Dad!" the boy-ranger, as he was called, exclaimed. *"Dad!"*

Thus he held that gray, splintery, crumbling skull to him.

No need to say the father had been cleared. He had taken the Law and the honor of the rangers into that hidden fastness—and died under the odds of five to one—just about evenup from the looks of things!

CAPTAIN LOUDON turned to the wounded train robber.

"You knew the way into heah?" the ranger demanded.

"I'd been here," the wounded desperado admitted, "I'd been here three-four times, back yonder, when I was a kid. My pap come down from the Little Rockies—him and the others. Papers said the Cobrette bank was took for a gold stake. Cowboy detectives picked me up—with some horses and some paper money. I was away five-six years. I'd only just got around to comin' down here. Now ain't it comical? Us needn't to have held up that train, with all that gold yuh tell about layin' around. There's a cache somewhere—Dad and them figgered to 'stablish outfits in South America. Trouble was, they made one raid too many."

"How 'bout you, then?"

"If I'd come along this trail first, I'd never've needed to have done that first train holdup," the young outlaw sighed. "Reckon I had what I got comin' to me."

"Reckon we all get that," Captain Loudon remarked. "I could have saved myse'f ten years of mistrustin'. You Mark Veyden! You got good blood in you! Sho 'nough! And those big, Northern, Four-dot Circle horses are good, too—yas, suh!"

"We'll Kill that Big Hombre in Town—but We'll Have to Act Pronto, Because He's the Fastest Thing on Wheels!"

THE "big hombre" the outlaws were discussing was Jim Hays, the name under which Texas Ranger Jim Hatfield was hiding his identity. "I'd like to get my hooks into that golden sorrel of his," one of the badmen remarked. "Best hoss I ever see. When we come up with the big feller remember I got fins on his gelding."

Jim Hatfield, cautiously listening from the shadows behind the camping raiders, chuckled grimly to himself. They figured him for a sure goner and were even divvying up his horse Goldy. But he had some tricks up his sleeve they didn't count on. . . .

Follow the Lone Wolf Ranger as he combats the land swindlers and rustlers of the Chisholm Trail in RED RIVER RULE, one of the most exciting Jim Hatfield novels Jackson Cole has ever written. It's in next month's issue—and it races with whirlwind action from start to finish! Look forward to Jim Hatfield at his fighting best in a story packed with two-fisted thrills!

OUTLAW POSSE

By

SCOTTY RAND

Being sheriff requires more than just wearing a badge!

Sheriff Zeke Adams

SHERIFF ZEKE ADAMS was late. He sent his horse at a reckless gallop over the rough trail, hoping he could still catch one of the posses at the rendezvous point.

The sheriff had come back to town that morning to find the bank robbed and two posses of irate citizens out on the trail of the bandits. They had left word for the sheriff that the outlaws had been seen heading toward Cross Creek and that they would try to meet the sheriff at a point near the Witches' Den—a boulder-strewn canyon.

So to save time, Adams cut across country straight for the Witches' Den, hoping to meet the posse there, or if he were too late, to pick up the tracks from there.

Presently he noticed the tracks of three horses cutting in from the side and taking the rough trail he was on. Men from town? he wondered. Or innocent cowboys—or some of the bandits?

A spot of color caught his eye and he saw a red bandanna caught on a low mesquite limb and fluttering in the breeze. He picked it off the limb as he went by and stuffed it into a pocket of his shirt.

The Witches' Den was silent and deserted. There were horse tracks here, coming from several directions, trampling up the ground and departing in several directions. It was a maze.

Sheriff Adams absently mopped his brow and tried to figure out his next move. A voice spoke harshly from the bushes:

"Hold it, friend, we're coming out!"

Hoofs clinked on stone and three men rode into the canyon.

"We'd about give you up!" one of them said.

"I'm late, I know," Adams replied. "Glad yuh waited for me. Which way did they go?"

"South," said one of the men. "So we'll go west."

Adams was a little surprised that the strategy of the hunt should be taken out of his hands this way, but he reasoned that the men could not wait, so they had made their own judgments and split their forces to the best advantage.

Certainly if some had ridden south to search, it was logical they take another direction.

They rode west and the three possemen seemed to know exactly where they were going. They entered a region of broken and tangled canyons which the sheriff knew from hunting trips as a boy, but thought no one else knew as well. To his surprise, they led him into a well-hidden box canyon with a small pond and a log cabin set in a grove of firs.

"There's the place," said one of the men.

Suspicions crystallized in the sheriff's mind. But he kept still and

waited to see what would happen.

They dismounted in front of the cabin and one of the men took a pair of bulky saddle-bags from behind his kak. Inside the cabin he dumped them out on the table. With little surprise, Sheriff Adams found himself looking at tied bundles of greenbacks which he knew were the bank loot.

"That's the whole pile," the bandit said. "Yore share's a thousand if yuh do yore part. See that grub and fresh horses are here, let us know as soon's the shoutin' dies down and it's safe to move. Savvy?"

He drew a deep breath and wiped his forehead with a red bandanna. Looking at it, Sheriff Zeke Adams saw something strange about it. There were holes cut in it. He realized they were eyeholes—that the bandanna had recently served as a mask.

UNCONSCIOUSLY his fingers went to his pocket, to the bandanna he had picked off the mesquite limb. For the first time he looked at it and saw identical eyeholes. So that was how they had picked him out! The bandanna was a signal to them.

He spread it out and something caught in its folds dropped to the floor with a clatter. Winking up at them was his sheriff's star!

There was a little hushed silence in the cabin. The outlaws stared down at the star, then up at Adams. He could almost see the wheels turning in their heads.

"Sheriff, eh?" one of the men breathed. His gun hand began to curve over the butt of the Colt riding low on his thigh.

In the silence came the sound of horses' hoofs. All four men strained their ears, but none dared take his eyes from the others. The approaching sound could be some of the posse, which meant danger for the outlaws, or it could be the man the outlaws were expecting—the one they had mistaken the sheriff for—in which case it meant curtains for Adams.

The tension broke like a giant spring as one of the bandits drew. Adams pulled his gun at the same moment, shot the bandit through the arm and upended the table on the other two, scattering money left and right. Then, taking his chances outside, he burst out of the door.

A handful of men whooped as they saw him and spurred their horses into a gallop. Adams' heart leaped as he saw they were his own men from town. And riding in front of them, arms trussed, was a surly character who could be none other than the missing outlaw whom the bandits had expected to meet!

"Take cover and surround the cabin!" Adams yelled, sprinting for a rock. "They're inside!"

The posse tumbled off their horses and in a moment, rifle lead was splintering the cabin walls. The outlaws gave up pretty soon, seeing it was hopeless. They trooped out, hands in air, all except the wounded one, who clutched his right arm with his left.

"Gee, Sheriff," said a member of the posse, peering into the cabin. "Lookit all the money in there."

"Stay out of there," Adams ordered.

"Don't yuh trust me?" the posseman demanded, hurt.

"With the money—shore! But you go tromping in there with yore big feet and yuh're liable to step on my badge which I was lunkhead enough to drop. I want that badge. From now on it's gonna remind me of somethin'—of how bein' just a mite careless can land yuh in the closest squeak of yore life!"

John McCord must make a split-second decision when the stern principles on which he has based his life are put to a difficult test in—

CODE TO FIGHT BY

By CLEE WOODS

One of Next Month's Quick-Trigger Action Stories!

LONG SAM DEALS IN DOLLARS

By
LEE BOND

Long Sam peered cautiously out on Main Street and saw Todd Baker surrounded by excited men

PISTOL shots had drawn Long Sam Littlejohn along the timbered ridge for a quarter-mile. He was directly above the spot where the Loma Pintado stage road forded Breakneck Creek now, hauling the big, ugly roan horse he called Sleeper to a halt in a thick stand of giant oaks. The pistols were still banging away down in the canyon below the ridge, and Littlejohn sat his roan for a moment, his thin, unusually tall body stretching up stiffly as he tried to see what was going on down there. He gave his yellow-thatched head a disappointed shake when he discovered that he could not see over the rim from his position.

"Sounds like a couple or three cowhands, takin' target practise, the way they're spacin' their shots," Littlejohn observed aloud. "But a bounty-plastered

Littlejohn Pits Sharp-Shooting Against Sharp-Dealing!

noose-dodger by the name of Long Sam Littlejohn better hadn't get too nosy about that shootin' until he knows for sure what it's all about, eh, Sleeper?"

Long Sam had swung out of the saddle as he talked, his lean hands dropping instinctively to readjust the hang of two black butted six-shooters that were slung against his thighs. He moved cautiously out towards the rim of the ridge, his black-clad figure at a cautious crouch as he crept into a stand of bushes. The pistols had gone silent now, but the shooters were still there at the gravelly ford on Breakneck Creek.

"What the heck!" Long Sam muttered, smoke-colored eyes widening in surprise.

Two Stetson hats, one gray, one brown, were propped up on sticks, and a long-sleeved calfskin jacket was hung on another beside them. Three men were holstering guns they had just reloaded. Two were bareheaded. The third wore a fine white Stetson, which he pushed back with a quick motion of his hand as he halted before the hats and jacket that had unquestionably been used as targets.

"Todd Baker, by thunder!" Long Sam muttered, watching the big fellow who wore the white Stetson.

The two bareheaded men were now lifting the Stetsons from the sticks that held them, and Long Sam saw them laughing as they poked exploring fingers through bullet holes in brims and crowns. The man who had picked up the brown Stetson was short and stocky, while the fellow who had hold of the gray hat was slim, medium-sized, and quick in his movements.

LONG SAM recognized the stocky fellow as Rufe Wicker and the small, quick man as Erd Garvey. They were a tough pair, those two, known to be mixed up in smuggling, stock stealing and other larcenous activities all along the Border.

Long Sam switched his smoky eyes to big Todd Baker, a gambler and stock buyer who had drifted into Loma Pintado four or five years before. This was the first time Long Sam had been in this country for almost two years, yet he had heard rumors to the effect that lumbering and mining had caused the town to boom considerably since his last visit. The gaunt outlaw remembered hearing, also, that Todd Baker had branched out, dealing in mines, lumber and cattle ranches.

"The big booger looks prosperous, all right," Long Sam said aloud. "But what's he messin' around with a pair of ridge-runners like Rufe Wicker and Erd Garvey for?"

Rufe Wicker had pulled the brown Stetson down over his fuzzy dark hair, and Erd Garvey had donned the gray hat. Garvey reached out now, took up the red-and-white calfskin jacket and slipped it on. He poked a finger in a bullet hole on the tip of the left shoulder, and said something that made Todd Baker and Rufe Wicker laugh.

Rufe Wicker pulled the three forked sticks out of the ground, rubbed his boot over the ground to fill the holes, then carried the sticks into a thicket beside the road. Erd Garvey followed Wicker, and when they reappeared a few moments later, they were leading six saddled horses. Long Sam grunted in surprise.

He could tell that Todd Baker had taken command now by the way he acted. He had swung up into a fancy, hand-tooled saddle that was cinched on a fine palomino stallion. He was talking and gesturing rapidly, while Rufe Wicker tied the reins of the three horses to the horns of the riderless saddles on their backs. Wicker mounted a chunky black horse and watched Erd Garvey unfasten a pair of saddlebags from a tall gray's saddle and hand the pouches up to Todd Baker.

"Jumpin' Jupiter!" Long Sam said excitedly.

Todd Baker had taken from each saddlebag four thick bundles of currency, holding them up, one at a time, and laughing. He tucked the bundles inside his shirt and tossed the empty bags back to Erd Garvey.

Rufe Wicker started the three riderless horses up the canyon, riding hard at their heels and swinging the free end of a lariat at their rumps. Todd Baker and Erd Garvey watched until the timber along the canyon swallowed Wicker and the horses he was driving, then separated, Erd Garvey heading down the stage road towards Loma Pintado at a run.

Todd Baker forded Breakneck Creek behind Garvey, walking his stallion along calmly. He rode out of the water on a rocky point, swinging away from the road. He crossed the timbered bottom and started up the slope, traveling straight towards

Long Sam Littlejohn.

Long Sam crawfished out of the thicket, ran to Sleeper, and swung up to the hand-tooled black saddle. He walked the roan deeper into the timber, halting where the low-sweeping boughs of a giant oak screened him. He waited there, watching the rim of the ridge top until Todd Baker appeared. Baker went south, trotting his stallion easily along the ridge. Long Sam grinned wryly, eased Sleeper forward when Baker was out of sight, and picked up the stallion's sign.

"Followin' that yahoo is apt to be a chore, Sleeper, for he'll likely try foggin' his sign," the gaunt outlaw muttered.

But following Todd Baker was no chore at all. Baker kept away from trails and roads until he was in the very outskirts of Loma Pintado, then trotted his fine stud casually along a side street to the main drag. He turned west on the town's principal street, which was, Long Sam noticed uneasily, boiling with activity.

Long Sam also noted that people started running towards Todd Baker, and decided that he had traveled far enough. He swung Sleeper into an alley, left the horse behind an unused shed that was almost hidden by tall weeds, then went on foot to the rear of the business buildings. Long Sam moved guardedly through a narrow, dark passage between two log walls, halting where shadow shrouded him as he peered cautiously out on Main Street.

Todd Baker sat his horse out there in the middle of a crowd, his jaw hanging open, shiny black eyes bugged out as if he were greatly surprised. The excited, shoving men around him were shouting, their voices a bedlam of anger and excitement.

"Is this some kind of a prank, boys?" Baker asked loudly. "Are yuh joshin', about Erd Garvey ridin' into town, claimin' him and Rufe Wicker had been held up and robbed of our beef money?"

"So it's all news to yuh, is it, Baker?" a stubby, grizzled man yelled.

"What do yuh mean by that kind of talk, Herb Denver?" Baker asked angrily.

"Why stall, Baker?" Denver ranted. "When yuh bunched up a thousand head of cattle a while back and got set to drive to market, yuh oily-tongued me and Nate Tolliver and Gus Pryor and Ed Butler into poolin' another thousand head to go to market with yore stuff."

"You had four hundred head of your Boxed D stuff in the pool herd," Baker nodded. "There were three hundred head of Nate Tolliver's Rockin' T steers. Gus Pryor sent a hundred and fifty head of his Bar 88 critters, and Ed Butler sent a hundred and fifty head of his Star B longhorns."

"Which tallies a thousand head," Herb Denver rasped. "Cattle were fetchin' an average of twenty dollars a head at the market, I hear. That's twenty thousand dollars, Baker, that me and Nate Tolliver and Gus Pryor and Ed Butler are out, for Erd Garvey claims him and Rufe Wicker got held up out at the Breakneck Creek ford and robbed of that money. Garvey had a bullet hole in the shoulder of his jacket and three-four bullet holes in his hat. He says Rufe Wicker got hit in the hat, too. And that's sorta funny, them two claimin' they was jumped by three bandits, who fogged them up plenty but couldn't hit nothin' meatier than their hats. Me, I think the whole thing is just twenty thousand dollars' worth of lies that was hatched in yore own skull, Baker!"

TODD BAKER did a good job of acting, Long Sam thought. Baker pulled himself up stiffly in the saddle, fists clenched as he glared down at the raging little ranchman who had bluntly accused him.

"Will some of you men be civil enough to tell me what happened?" he asked, appealing to the crowd in general.

"I reckon Herb told it all, Baker," a man replied. "Erd Garvey did come to town and say him and Rufe Wicker had been held up and robbed. Garvey said Wicker'd taken the trail of the three bandits. Sheriff Elmer Bland got a posse together and lit out of here, fast. Garvey rode with 'em."

Long Sam saw that the speaker was a big, fat man, with thick, gray hair hanging down in unkempt locks from beneath a shabby, sweat-marked Stetson. The speaker's voice had been blurred and husky-toned, and his broad face was blotched with red.

"Thanks, Tolliver," Todd Baker said slowly. "You had three hundred head of your Rockin' T steers in that pool herd that went up the trail with my cattle. But I see yuh're not accusin' me of bein' a thief, the way Herb Denver is."

"I feel the same way Herb does," Nate

Tolliver said huskily. "Gus Pryor and Ed Butler feel that way, too."

Long Sam saw Todd Baker's face redden, and knew that he was not faking anger, then.

"A lot of you people around here have been whisperin' things behind my back for a long time!" he lashed out. "You've claimed I make business deals off the bottom of the deck, and that's hurt my rep a lot. I've been wantin' a chance to shut such lyin' mouths, and I think this is the time I can do it!"

"Anybody who ever dealt with yuh got skinned!" some hombre yelled. "But yuh're gettin' paid back now, Baker. All that cut-over valley land yuh bought and had laid out into farms is stayin' on yore hands, because people are afraid to deal with yuh."

"All them hundreds of acres of land cost yuh a pile of dinero, Baker," little Herb Denver yelled. "But you should worry. Yuh've just made twenty thousand dollars, clear profit, on this razzle-dazzle hold-up scheme."

"I had a thousand head of cattle in that drive," Todd Baker said harshly. "If the bandits who held up Rufe Wicker and Erd Garvey get away, then I'm out a cool twenty thousand. But we won't talk about that, Herb. I said I want a chance to stop you and others like you from slanderin' me, and I think I can do it."

He broke off, ran coolly calculating eyes over the unfriendly faces. He looked back at scrawny little Herb Denver, and Long Sam thought he saw the hint of a grin kink the corners of Baker's mouth.

"Herb, if Sheriff Bland hasn't captured those bandits and recovered our money by noon tomorrow, you and Nate Tolliver and the other two, Gus Pryor and Ed Sutler, be down at my office yonder," Baker said loudly. "You've got eight thousand dollars comin', Herb, Nate Tolliver, there, has six thousand comin', Gus Pryor and Ed Sutler have three thousand apiece due them."

"What are yuh fixin' to do? Swap us that farm land yuh're stuck with for the cash yuh stole off us?" Herb Denver asked suspiciously.

"Before all of these witnesses, Denver, I'm tellin' yuh to fetch the other three men, who had cattle in that pool herd, down to my office at noon tomorrow, in case the sheriff fails to nab those bandits." Baker said. "I'll have cash money there to pay each of yuh his full claim."

The silence that fell was so complete Long Sam wondered if all those people out there were actually holding their breath.

"Well, dogged if Baker isn't a fast one, at that," Long Sam chuckled.

The gaunt outlaw was pretty sure he saw through Todd Baker's shenanigan. Having pulled off so many shady deals that local people were afraid to do business with him, Baker now found himself holding hundreds of acres of farm land which he could not turn to a profit.

"Now Baker pulls off this phony robbery, and makes the fancy play of offerin' to hand the men who trusted him with their cattle every cent they got comin'," Long Sam mused soberly. "That'll start a lot of people who have been considerin' Todd Baker a crook to wonderin' if they haven't been mistaken."

Long Sam savvied now why there had been three extra saddle horses out there at the Breakneck Creek ford. Sheriff Elmer Bland and his posse would track those three horses far back into the hills, where Rufe Wicker would be waiting to say he had trailed the three 'bandits' who had stolen the beef money. Sheriff Bland, and a lot of other honest people, would think the 'bandits' had had fresh horses waiting and had changed mounts, skittering yonderly into the roughs.

"Smooth," Long Sam spoke the one word, watching Todd Baker dismount at a hitch-bar under a big sign that bore his name and tie his stallion.

Baker started toward his office, but halted to face several men who had called to him and were hurrying through the street's deep dust. Men were moving everywhere now, and Long Sam realized that he had stuck around about as long as he dared. He counted doorways, saw that he was only three buildings east of Baker's office, then eased back into the dark runway between the buildings and returned to the cluttered alley.

CAUTION born of bitter years on the outlaw trails halted Long Sam short of the sunlight that lay in the alley. He heard stealthy steps and backpedaled until he melted into the darkest shadows where he stretched out prone on the ground. A man's slim figure was etched against the

bright oblong he watched, and Long Sam's breath drew in and held as excitement went through him in sharp waves.

The slim man had stopped squarely before the dark passage where Long Sam lay hidden. The fellow wore shiny black boots, gray trousers, and a cut-away black coat. As he turned, Long Sam saw a snowy shirt bosom and a brocaded vest that hugged his flat middle and was spanned by a thick gold watch chain. He had on a celluloid collar with a black string tie, and a flat-crowned black Stetson was slanted down over his eyes. His thin, mahogany-bronze face had a red slit of a mouth, high cheek bones, and a thin beak of a nose.

The man glanced into the dark passage, briefly probing the shadows with eyes that were as black and shiny as wet shoe buttons. He was Johnny Fishkiller, a half-breed Choctaw from up in the Indian Nations, and one of the wild bunch successfully bossed by a pretty little widow named Belle Reed.

Johnny Fishkiller's eyes probed through the dark passage to the light of the front street beyond, then he moved on, his step light and fast. Long Sam Littlejohn let out a slow breath and stood up. He ghosted to the corner of the log wall where he had lain and peered out cautiously. Johnny Fishkiller was going on up the alley, halting each time he came to an opening between buildings to peer towards the street. He went straight to the rear of the building Long Sam knew to be Todd Baker's office and reached out his left hand to try the back door latch. The door gave, and Johnny Fishkiller's right hand whisked a pearl-gripped six-shooter from beneath his coat tails as he stepped briskly through the door and out of Long Sam's sight.

"Well, now!" the gaunt outlaw said thoughtfully. He stepped out into the alley and strode briskly along until he came to a window.

A heavy drape had been pulled across the window, but the sash remained up, for Long Sam saw the curtain belly as a breeze touched it. He leaned against the log wall near the window, his head tilted as if he were reading a sun-yellowed newspaper that he had snatched up in the alley.

"So yuh're Johnny Fishkiller!" Todd Baker was saying gruffly. "I've heard of yuh. Yuh're half Choctaw Indian, half white. Some addle-pated doctor from Missouri picked yuh up when yuh were just a boy, and spent a pile of good money puttin' yuh through fancy schools. A lot of good it done him, now didn't it?"

"My background has nothing to do with this call, Mr. Baker," Johnny Fishkiller said. "Will you please answer the question I asked you?"

Long Sam listened more intently. He had crossed trails with Johnny Fishkiller a few times. The half-breed's calm voice, his polished, gentlemanly manner, made it hard to believe that he was a nervy thief and a cold-blooded killer.

"Question?" Todd Baker was blustering. "What question did yuh ask me, anyhow?"

"Don't be childish, Mr. Baker," Johnny chided gently. "After all, this gun in my hand is not without significance. I asked you what sort of cute trick you're pulling here, and so far you've evaded answering."

"I don't even know what yuh're talking about!" Todd Baker snapped.

"It seems incredible that you would be so stupid, yet I do believe you have on your person that money your henchmen are supposed to have lost to bandits," Johnny Fishkiller said pleasantly.

"Git out of here, Injun!" Baker said hoarsely. "If yuh don't, I'll let out a holler that'll fetch half the town. Then where'll yuh be?"

"I'd be right here, to suggest that the good gentlemen of this fair city examine the bulges under your shirt," Johnny laughed easily. "Would you mind that, Mr. Baker?"

Long Sam Littlejohn grinned appreciatively. Todd Baker certainly would mind letting people see the objects that made his shirt bulge, and the quavery note in his voice said so.

"Ah, just as I thought!" Johnny said suddenly. "The bulges under your shirt are no doubt packets of paper money, my sly carpet-bagger. Forty thousand, cool cash, eh?"

Long Sam's face stiffened, losing the grin of enjoyment. His smoky eyes looked startled as he swung a glance at the billowing curtain that fluttered and snapped in the breeze. Inside the room beyond that curtain, he heard Todd Baker cursing in a whining sound of mingled rage and alarm.

"I can well understand your being per-

turbed, Mr. Baker," Johnny said pleasantly. "After I've relieved you of the money inside your shirt, you'll actually have to dig into your own pocket to pay those cowmen. I relish this moment and regret that more of your carpetbagging kind can't be caught in the same sort of predicament. Hand over the money, please."

Long Sam's smoky eyes went hard with swift determination. He moved closer to the window, knowing that the popping, whipping curtain would mask any slight sounds he might make against the log wall.

"Get away from me, you hominy guzzler," Todd Baker was saying hoarsely. "If yuh'll listen to reason, maybe we can work out a deal that—"

There was a quick shuffle of feet, a snarl of fear and rage that ended, half-uttered, as steel struck hard against flesh and bone. Even as those sounds lived briefly, Long Sam Littlejohn was throwing a leg over the window sill, the guns in his hands shoving away the curtain until he was beyond it, watching the blur of Johnny Fishkiller's slim body whip around.

The gun in Fishkiller's hand spat red-tipped thunder, and Long Sam winced as the slug ripped across his left jaw, touching lightly but hotly. Then his own twin guns bucked, and Johnny Fishkiller went over backwards so fast his shiny boots flew high into the air.

Long Sam swore and plunged in to slap the crown of Todd Baker's head with the barrel of his left-hand Colt. He leaped over the sprawled man, slammed home a stout bolt on the inside of Baker's office door. When Long Sam whirled around, Johnny Fishkiller was lying just as he had fallen.

FISTS were pounding on the bolted door to Todd Baker's private office now, and a dozen voices were shouting the carpetbagger's name. Long Sam bent over Baker, yanked the man's shirt out, and hastily grabbed the four fat bundles of bills.

"Baker!" a man yelled through the locked door. "What's the trouble in there?"

Long Sam hastily crammed the money inside his shirt. He walked to the window, pulled the curtain aside, and looked out. The alley was completely deserted, and Long Sam moved fast, feeling the bundles of money bounce inside his shirt. He was panting hard when he went around the long-deserted shed and through the tall weeds to where he had left his horse.

"Johnny Fishkiller didn't just happen to show up here and make a try at grabbin' the beef money off Todd Baker," Long Sam muttered, as he swung up to Sleeper's saddle.

He turned his ugly roan south, riding out past the fringes of the town, then swinging along a timbered slope. When he was at the far western edge of Loma Pintado, he reined in towards a shabby little log house that stood alone on a slight rise. The yard was barren, and the dusty panes of the windows seemed to stare at Long Sam like tired, dull eyes as he rode past the house and out to a corral of poles that circled a stout log barn.

Long Sam dismounted and led his roan through a tall gate and on to the barn. After he had stalled and fed the horse, he stood for a moment, listening to Sleeper's powerful teeth rip bites from ears of corn. He saw the neatly kept interior of the barn and shook his head, smiling a little ruefully.

"Elmer is like all bachelors," he said musingly. "He keeps his place with an eye for the comforts of himself and his horses, with never a care for the look of things."

Leaving the barn and corral, he followed a well-worn path down to the forlorn little house that was Sheriff Elmer Bland's bachelor home. Long Sam let himself in the back door and stood there for a moment, glancing over the clean, coarsely masculine room that served both as kitchen and dining room. Beyond, through an open door, he could see the sheriff's living room, drab but neatly kept.

Long Sam sighed, gave his head a slow shake. Unless the law got him and hanged him for some of the crimes he was supposed to have committed, he thought grimly, he would probably wind up living in a place like this, some day, with loneliness, defeat, and frustration for companions. His hands touched the four fat bulges of money under his shirt.

"Forty thousand dollars!" he said slowly. "Down in South America, a gringo with that much cash money—"

Long Sam swore suddenly and with harshness. He pulled the hat off his head, hung it on a wall peg, and dumped water

from a brass-bound cedar bucket into a tin washpan.

Long Sam ate heartily of cold food, piled his dishes in a pan, then returned to the table, sat down, and built a smoke. He pulled the four packets of money from inside his shirt, feeling excitement stir in him again as he looked down at the wealth. He began counting then, and the cigarette was hanging dead and forgotten in the corner of his mouth when he finished.

"Forty thousand, cool, hard cash!" he said huskily, and the hand he reached up to pluck away the dead cigarette was shaking.

He lifted a corner of the white cloth that covered butter dish, salt and pepper shakers, and syrup pitcher and sugar bowl on the sheriff's table. He pushed the money beneath the cloth, then leaned back, staring at nothing, his mind occupied in swift, hard thought. He had arrived at what he considered a good guess as to how Johnny Fishkiller had known Todd Baker would be packing forty thousand dollars in cash, when the slam of approaching hoofs brought him up quickly.

Long Sam went into the living room, standing where he could see the trail that slanted down to Loma Pintado's main drag. There was a stir down along that street, men and women and youngsters milling everywhere. But Long Sam's eyes left the shifting crowd, came back to Sheriff Elmer Bland, who had ridden up the sloping trail and into the yard.

Bland swung down from a hard-run horse and started up the steps, a tall, thin man with almost white hair. He stopped very suddenly, head jerking up, the hand he had reached out towards the screen door halted. Gray eyes that were as hard as drill steel probed through the dusty screen, searching the gloomy interior of the house.

"The house is yores, Elmer, so come on in," Long Sam spoke quietly.

The sheriff grunted, reached out, and whipped the screen back. He came through into the room and stopped on skidding boots, his right hand down close to the butt of the gun holstered on his lean thigh. He stood there, mute for long seconds, a hint of pallor touching his face.

"Yuh picked a heck of a time to come callin', Sam," he said finally, and his voice was more weary than complaining.

Long Sam held out his hand, grinning. Bland gripped the hand automatically, pumped once in a friendly way, then gave a hard yank as color touched his neck and face.

"What are yuh tryin' to do, cripple me?" Long Sam chuckled, spreading and wiggling bruised fingers.

"Get that fugitive from a glue factory yuh call a horse and split the breeze away from here, Sam," Bland said crossly.

"What's the trouble?" Long Sam asked innocently.

"Trouble?" the sheriff groaned. "Three galoots stuck up Rufe Wicker and Erd Garvey out at Breakneck Creek ford a while ago, and got clean away with forty thousand dollars in cash. The money belonged to Todd Baker and four other fellers. The three bandits changed horses up in the rock country at the head of Breakneck, and their sign ain't been picked up again. I rode back to town to gather more men and change horses, and blamed if one of Belle Reed's roughnecks, from up in the Nations, hadn't waltzed into town and robbed Baker at Baker's office while I was gone. But—"

HE BROKE off, pulling in a long breath, his temper cooling, but leaving tension in him.

"But what, Elmer?" Long Sam asked quietly.

"Baker's story don't make sense," the sheriff said slowly. "He claims Johnny Fishkiller, that roughneck from Belle Reed's wild bunch, walked in, throwed a gun on him, demanded money, then hit him on the jaw with the Colt. Baker claims that he was knocked down but not plumb cold, and that he heard somebody else come into the office and swap shots with Johnny Fishkiller. Then, so Baker says, this other party slapped him across the head with a gun, robbed his desk of sixty thousand dollars, and got clean away."

"Baker's a liar," Long Sam said bluntly.

"I'd think that, too, for keepin' sixty thousand dollars in cash around his office don't sound like Todd Baker," the sheriff groaned. "But he's so crazy mad, Sam, that it can't be play actin' on his part. He's offered two thousand dollars for the return of the money he says was stolen, too. On top of that, Baker's left jaw is swelled up, and there's a big knot on top of his

head, provin' that he sure was hit twice. And Johnny Fishkiller was layin' there in the office, stone dead."

"Two thousand smackeroos!" Long Sam droned. "And it'll be honest money—almost."

"Don't get mixed up in this mess, boy," the sheriff warned gravely.

"How long have Rufe Wicker and Erd Garvey been hooked up with Baker?" Long Sam asked.

"Almost a year—ten months, at least," the sheriff said, frowning. "But if that pair of prize hellions have pulled anything shady since they've been here I sure haven't been able to catch 'em at it."

"What are they supposed to be doin' for Todd Baker?" the gaunt outlaw wanted to know.

"Their job is to handle the livestock Baker buys and sells," the sheriff explained. "They've made several trips to market with herds of Baker's cattle. They were on the way back from market today with money from the sale of two thousand longhorns, when they got held up."

"Yuh like to put a legal halter on Todd Baker, wouldn't yuh, Elmer?" Long Sam asked thoughtfully.

"I'd give ten years of whatever life I've got left to be able to scotch that snake!" the sheriff said. "And that's not all personal peeve, Sam. Baker is ruinin' this town's chance to grow and prosper. He's spread out so much that any man who wants to come here and invest money in any kind of business soon finds out he has to deal with Todd Baker to get a start. And Baker's cussed greed discourages such investors, sends them away to invest their money elsewhere."

"I put somethin' on yore kitchen table out yonder that I want to show yuh, Elmer," Long Sam said quietly. "After yuh've seen what is out there, and heard a few things I've got to tell, I reckon we can figure a way between now and good dark, to fix Todd Baker's clock."

Todd Baker's usually handsome face was haggard and tight with nervousness as he paced up and down his private office. He kept glancing at a fancy clock on his desk, cursing over the way time was slipping by. Baker's eyes were sunken and bloodshot, and there were deep lines at the corners of his mouth. At a quarter past eleven, Todd Baker suddenly dropped heavily into the chair behind his shiny desk. He ran shaking fingers through his already rumpled black hair, then tugged the limp collar loose at his throat.

"Wicker and Garvey have quit me—run out on me," he muttered hoarsely. "That, or Herb Denver and Nate Tolliver picked them up on the quiet, aiming to question them. If it's that—"

Baker broke off with a groan as he glanced at the clock again. He pulled out a desk drawer, produced bottle and glass. He poured and downed a stiff one, filled the glass again. He was reaching out to cork the bottle when the back door was opened and slapped shut.

Todd Baker got on his feet so fast the swivel chair crashed over behind him. The bottle he had tried to cork fell over, the amber fluid gurgling from it and making a chuckling sound in the silence. He groped for the gurgling bottle, stood it up in the pool of spilled liquor, his eyes never leaving the man who had stepped inside the back door and was standing there, watching him.

"Littlejohn!" Baker said hoarsely. "Long Sam Littlejohn."

"Howdy," Long Sam said and stepped forward, his stride unhurried.

Color came back into Baker's face, his eyes bulged, and became hot with anger.

"What do you want here, Littlejohn?" Baker asked harshly.

Long Sam stopped a pace from Baker's desk, smoky eyes meeting the promoter's boring gaze levelly.

"Twenty thousand dollars," he said simply.

"Are you batty?" Baker glowered. "I keep no such amount of money as that around my office. What is this, a holdup?"

"Speakin' of a holdup, Baker, reminds me that I've heard a tale about you bein' robbed of sixty thousand dollars, right here in this office, this afternon," Long Sam drawled.

"I certainly was robbed of sixty thousand dollars!" Baker burst out. "Now you come along and want—"

"You certainly were not robbed of sixty thousand," Long Sam cut in. "There was forty thousand even in those four bundles of currency. So I dropped around for the twenty-thousand balance due me."

"You?" Todd Baker croaked. "You're the party who came in here and shot—"

He broke off, caution and anger silencing him. He glanced at the clock, ran his eyes around the room in a desperate way, then looked back at the gaunt outlaw.

"You robbed me!" he said hoarsely.

"I heard and saw yuh make that grandstand play out in the street when yuh offered Herb Denver and those other cowmen their money, makin' it look like yuh'd have to pay it out of your own pocket," Long Sam said coldly. "So I figured to teach one carpetbaggin' leech a lesson, and headed around back here, aimin' to relieve yuh of that money. But Johnny Fishkiller cut in ahead of me, and put this blister across my cheek with a slug when I stepped in here. I shot Johnny, batted you on top of the head with one of my guns, and got the four bundles of beef money out of yore shirt."

ANGER was mounting in Todd Baker again, putting bright spots on his cheeks and bringing a fierce brightness to his eyes.

"I think I savvy why yuh told that windy about bein' robbed of sixty thousand here in yore office," Long Sam said quickly.

"Do you?" Baker asked, looking at him in a slow, measuring way.

"You aim to welch on the promise yuh made to pay Herb Denver and those other cowmen for the steers they trusted yuh to market for them," Long Sam said. "By claimin' yuh lost sixty thousand to an unknown robber, yuh'd have a good excuse to say yuh're fresh out of cash, and stall Denver and those others off."

"I certainly don't intend to hand those fools any twenty thousand dollars!" Baker snapped.

"Well, I guess yuh didn't aim to actually rob those four ranchmen of their beef money, at that," Long Sam shrugged. "All yuh meant to do was whitewash yoreself by makin' out like yuh paid them out of yore own pocket, eh?"

"All right, I intended to whitewash myself," Baker retorted angrily.

"Haven't yuh been wonderin' how Johnny Fishkiller got into a position to know yuh'd be here in this office with that money on yuh?" Long Sam asked slowly.

"Of course I've been wondering about that," Baker gritted. "Belle Reed got wind, somehow, that I meant to stage a phony robbery, evidently, and sent that smooth-talking pet of hers to lift the money. But how that girl got wise is something I can't figure out."

"I doubt if Belle Reed knew anything about yore plans," Long Sam grunted. "I know nothin' for sure, but at a guess, Baker, I'd say Rufe Wicker and Erd Garvey double-crossed yuh."

"What's that?" Baker cried, more excited than angry.

"It's only a guess," Long Sam replied. "But Rufe Wicker and Erd Garvey haven't shown up, have they?"

"Why do yuh suspect Rufe Wicker and Erd Garvey of havin' double-crossed me, Littlejohn?" Baker asked sharply.

"A trick like that would be just about their speed," Long Sam said bluntly.

"Maybe yuh're right, maybe not," Baker said harshly. "What I'd like to know is why yuh've come back here, Littlejohn, instead of takin' that forty thousand yuh got off me and ridin' down the wind."

"Maybe I want to make a deal with yuh," Long Sam droned.

"Deal?" Baker's interest quickened. "What kind of a deal?"

"Yuh offered two thousand dollars, cash, for the return of that beef money I took off yuh today," Long Sam said slowly. "If I handed that money back to yuh, Baker, would yuh pay me that reward? And would yuh give Herb Denver, Nate Tolliver, Gus Pryor and Ed Sutler their money, too?"

"Are you zany?" Baker asked, blank amazement in his eyes.

"Maybe," Long Sam drawled. "Anyhow, I wouldn't expect a galoot like you to understand why I'm willin' to swap forty thousand dollars in stolen money for two thousand dollars fairly honest money. But I'll do it, providin' I know Herb Denver and the other three cowmen will get their money."

Todd Baker turned white again, and his eyes were burning like coals with an excitement that made him shake. He poured and downed a stiff drink, then dragged the back of one hand across his trembling mouth.

"Hand me that money, Littlejohn!" he said hoarsely. "I'll give yuh the two-thousand-dollar reward, on the spot. And yuh've got my word that Herb Denver and

those other three greasy-sackers will get every penny due them."

"You'd give me the two thousand reward, because I'd bend a gun over yore head if yuh tried not to," Long Sam said coldly. "But yore word that Denver and those other three ranchmen will get their money isn't enough. Yuh'll have to put it in writin', Big Mister!"

"Listen, Littlejohn, yuh don't have to worry about me welchin'," Baker burst out. "Not another soul around here knows it, but a dozen or so farmers are due to show up here any day now, to look at some of the farm land I have for sale. Those farmers are from the Deep South, where hundreds like them are dissatisfied under Yankee rule. If I sell those men farms, they'll write their friends, and within six months to a year, I'll have buyers for every acre of farm land I own. But if this first group of men come here, and hear me called unkind names, they'll refuse to deal with me."

"So that's it," Long Sam mused. "You'd hand back the money that belongs to Herb Denver and his friends, knowin' everyone would be a little cautious about callin' yuh the crook yuh are, after that. But I hate to think what kind of deals yuh'd work on those people who are headed here to seek new homes."

"The devil take those Johnny Rebs!" Baker snapped. "They'll have money in their pockets, and it may as well be me that gets it. Quit worryin' about—"

Baker's voice broke off suddenly. Booted feet were pounding out in the front office and drawing rapidly towards the door that opened into Baker's private office. Long Sam leaped down the room, flattening against the wall beside the office door.

TODD BAKER swore hoarsely, shoved his hand towards the six-shooter holstered on his thigh. He jerked his hand away hastily when he saw Long Sam's twin guns come leaping out, their muzzles slanted his way.

"Act natural," Long Sam ordered, and the whisper had barely left his lips when the door burst open and slammed shut behind two men.

Long Sam grinned coldly, laid his thumbs over the hammers of his guns, and looked at the backs of Rufe Wicker and Erd Garvey. They bounded towards Baker's desk, panting as if they had run a considerable distance.

"Todd, what's this we hear about one of Belle Reed's bunch holdin' yuh up here in yore office?" stocky Rufe Wicker sang out.

"Judas Priest!" Erd Garvey cried. "Look at the blood on the carpet, there, Rufe. What we heard is the truth, I reckon."

"Where have you two been?" Baker snapped the words out, his lips trembling with anger and suspicion.

"We fiddled around out in the hills, so's everyone would think we were tryin' to cut the sign of the bandits that are supposed to have robbed us," Erd Garvey said slowly.

"Sheriff Bland came in two hours before sunset," Baker snapped. "The posse got in just after dusk."

"Sure, we know," Rufe Wicker said soothingly. "But Erd and me figgered to make it look like we was sure tryin' to find them bandits, so we stayed in the hills."

"But when Johnny didn't show up, you headed for town, eh?" Long Sam's dry voice brought Rufe Wicker and Erd Garvey around as if they were controlled by the same set of muscles.

Their hands had dived to gun butts, and their startled eyes goggled at Long Sam, who stood leaning against the wall, a cocked pistol in each slim hand. Rufe Wicker and Erd Garvey took their hands off pistol grips.

"You boys had two-thirds of forty thousand dollars' worth of bad luck today," Long Sam drawled. "I caught Johnny Fishkiller holdin' Baker up, and had to shoot him."

"Johnny Fishkiller?" Erd Garvey said. "I've heard of him, Sam. One of Belle Reed's boys, ain't he?"

Erd Garvey had sleepy brown eyes set in a thin, tight-lipped face. He was cool and nervy, and rated one of the most deadly gunmen along the frontier.

"The game's up, boys," Long Sam said stonily. "I pumped two slugs through Johnny after he burnt this blister across my face with a bullet. But two slugs through a man's middle won't always kill him sudden. And I reckon you know a Fancy Dan like Johnny would want to unburden before he cashed in his chips."

"So Johnny did some talkin', did he?"

Rufe Wicker asked no one in particular.

Wicker's stocky body settled down and forward a little, as if he were suddenly tired. His round, seamed face paled, but his chill blue eyes were steady and dangerously alert as he glanced at Todd Baker, then back at Long Sam.

"So you two decided to double-cross me, did yuh?" Baker flung the words furiously at his two hirelings.

"That's right," Erd Garvey said lazily. "And just what do yuh think you'll do about it, carpetbagger?"

Long Sam chuckled dryly. Todd Baker was batting his eyes rapidly, taken aback by Garvey's attitude. Baker stepped out from behind his desk and stood on wide-planted feet, face reddening in anger after Long Sam's laughter.

"I'll settle with you two later!" he snapped at Wicker and Garvey. "I'm busy right now, so get out of here, both of yuh."

"Shut up, windbag!" Rufe Wicker said, and did not even glance at Todd Baker.

"Littlejohn, I reckon the things I've been hearin' about Joe Fry, the Deputy U. S. Marshal from Austin being the only lawman who really tries to nail yore hide on the fence are true," Erd Garvey said thinly. "But yuh've stubbed yore toe this time, Big Shorty! Yuh signed yore own death warrant when yuh beefed Johnny Fishkiller."

"You and Wicker aim to take up where Johnny left off?" Long Sam drawled.

"Erd and me fight no man's battles except our own," Rufe Wicker said gravely. "But there's the wild, woolly bunch Belle Reed bosses, Sam. Johnny was Belle's favorite beau. She'll put a price on yore hide for killin' Johnny, and some of the fastest guns in the southwest will be waitin' to smoke yuh down."

"Put up yore guns, Sam," Erd Garvey grinned drily. "You shortchanged me and Rufe out of considerable cash when yuh downed Johnny, that's certain. But nobody ever called yuh a liar and made it stick, so if yuh claim Johnny started fireworks, then Rufe and me can't blame yuh. What'd yuh do, pocket the whole forty thousand for yore own self, yuh long-shanked sinner?"

STUDYING Erd Garvey and Rufe Wicker attentively, Long Sam saw more envy than anything else in their glances. He lowered the hammers of his guns, pushed the weapons into holsters.

"I pocketed the forty thousand," he said quietly. "But I was just makin' a dicker with Baker to return the money to him when you boys showed up."

"You'd return that money?" Erd Garvey's voice was as sharp as a whip popping in the room.

"Get out of here, you two!" Todd Baker burst out. "Littlejohn offered to return that money for the two-thousand-dollar reward I offered, and I took him up on it."

"Sam, are yuh crazy?" Rufe Wicker asked hoarsely.

"The two thousand I aim to collect will come out of Baker's end of that beef money, and I don't mind nickin' him," Long Sam chuckled. "Herb Denver and the other ranchers who trust you galoots to market their stock will get their cattle money. And I could whoop off two thousand dollars before the feelin' of wealth got to makin' me too big for my britches. So I made the dicker with Baker."

"You've got the money on yuh, Sam?" Erd Garvey asked, and his suddenly gleaming eyes made his grin look a little silly.

"He came here to make a deal with me, so where else would the money be except on him?" Todd Baker snapped. "Now clear out, you two double-crossers, and let me finish with Littlejohn!"

Rufe Wicker and Erd Garvey swapped the briefest of glances, then turned their backs squarely to Long Sam. Erd Garvey reached out, started to pick up the quart bottle on Baker's desk.

"What's the matter, is that bottle cracked or somethin'?" he asked.

"Sure seems to be leakin', for there's a puddle all around it," Rufe Wicker said. "Pick it up careful. I'll get the glass, and we'll try to get us a nip before we sift yonderly."

They were both leaning forward, their full attention on the bottle and the shot glass on Todd Baker's desk. Their hands moved, and only then did Long Sam realize that taking a drink was about the last thing on their minds. It was the way they suddenly hunched over and down that warned him.

But that split second warning was enough for Long Sam Littlejohn. He wasted no time shifting position, but sent

his own hands down, pulling the guns from his holsters in a single flipping motion. Flame and smoke gusted at him from the guns of Erd Garvey and Rufe Wicker, and as thunderous sound filled the room he felt a blow that was like the impact of a pony's kick against his right thigh.

The blow flung Long Sam over sidewise. His guns were bucking against his palms, and even as he slid down along the wall he saw Rufe Wicker double over, grabbing at his middle, then pitch down to the floor. A bullet dug splinters off the wall beside Long Sam's face, and another knocked the hat off his head as he hit the floor.

The matched guns in Long Sam's hands roared in unison, and he saw Erd Garvey's thin body whip over backwards across Baker's desk. Garvey's booted feet threshed, and his flailing arms knocked the quart bottle spinning. Then Garvey came tumbling off the edge of the desk, blood spilling from his gaping mouth, the life gone out of him by the time he struck the floor.

"Hold it, Baker!" a voice boomed. "Throw that gun down, or you're a dead duck!"

Long Sam gulped breath into his lungs, flexed his painfully hurt right leg. Finding he had no broken bones, he started to get up. He braced himself against the partition wall, the pain in his bullet-torn thigh making him a little dizzy as he stood there watching Sheriff Elmer Bland and a half dozen other men rush through the back door and spread out around the room.

"Sam, it started so blamed fast I couldn't get in to help yuh!" the sheriff burst out. "You hit bad, boy?"

"I took a slug high up in my right leg, and it hurts like thunder," Long Sam gritted. "Bullet missed the bone, or I couldn't stand. Where did these gents with you come from?"

"The fat little fella, yonder, is Bill McCray, mayor of the town," the sheriff said quietly. "You know Felix Alvardo, the saddle maker, and Guy Foster, yonder, the livery owner. The other three men are merchants, Sam. I picked that bunch up and followed yuh down here. We were all hunkered outside that winder, and heard every dad-blamed word that was spoken in here."

"Why the crowd?" Long Sam asked sharply. "I thought yuh'd be out there alone, listenin' to what Todd Baker said to me."

"It's a pretty well known fact around here, Sam, that you and me are friends," the sheriff said quietly. "So Baker, there, could have shouted down anything I said, claimin' you and me had framed him or somethin' like that. But it can't be said that the mayor and these others are yore personal friends, so—"

"The devil we aren't that man's friends, Elmer Bland," the fat little mayor yelled. "Anyhow, we sure will be, from now on. Outlaw or not, Long Sam Littlejohn has loosened the tentacles of an octopus that has been sucking the financial life-blood from our community. Every man, woman and child in Loma Pintado owes him friendship and respect."

"You framed me, Littlejohn!" Todd Baker burst out. "You had this pack of addlepates outside my window, listening to what was said. You tricky hellion, I'll remember this."

THE men with Sheriff Bland looked at him with disgust.

"You will remember this night, Baker," Felix Alvardo said slowly. "I hope the law can put you in jail for a very long time. But if you do escape legal punishments, certainly you are through here."

"What about Littlejohn?" Baker yelled angrily. "You fools heard him confess that he robbed me, didn't yuh?"

"Long Sam turned that money over to me, Baker," the sheriff snapped. "It's in the safe, over at my office. Now shut up, and don't get any notions about wanderin' off any place. The mayor and these others will take yuh over to my jail and lock yuh up."

"Lock me up?" Baker glared. "You fool, I'll sue yuh if yuh do that to me!"

"I'm holdin' yuh for questionin' until I can see what the county attorney thinks about charges," the sheriff said flatly. "Also, I'm holdin' yuh in protective custody, as they say. If you was to go prancin' around these streets after that crowd I heard gatherin' out front finds out the straight of things, yuh'd get tarred and dipped in feathers, if not lynched."

Long Sam had holstered his guns, picked up his hat, and was limping towards the back door. The sheriff overtook him, grabbed his arm, and helped him down the

steps and out into the cooling night air.

"Sam, I'm worried," the sheriff said, and sounded it.

"What's the trouble now?" the gaunt outlaw asked wearily.

"That Belle Reed gal was sweet on Johnny Fishkiller, like Garvey and Wicker claimed," the sheriff groaned. "And you know what kind of a disposition that woman has. She'll set her whole pack on yuh, boy, sure as the world is round."

"I've been thinkin' about that," Long Sam admitted. "Belle Reed won't like it when she hears that I beefed her smooth talkin' boy friend, I know. On the other hand, Elmer, there's a gent up there in the Nations who is mighty crazy about Belle. His name's Sam Starr, and he's had to play second fiddle to slick-tongued Johnny Fishkiller for quite a while."

"Yuh know Sam Starr?" the sheriff asked sharply.

"I know him," Long Sam said. "And Starr is one party who won't be after my hide for drillin' Fishkiller, you can bet on that. Starr swings a lot of influence up there in the Nations, and I've got a hunch he'll sort of see that Belle's faunchin' over Johnny's death don't stampede her outlaws into givin' me too much trouble. Sam Starr is in love with Belle Reed, and now that Fishkiller is out of the runnin' I'd be willin' to bet that Belle Reed will become Belle Starr."

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(Continued from page 8)

a splitting headache. I sort of suspected that there was somethng powerful in the plant, besides its aromatic smell.

It turns out that there is, because a researcher named Dr. William G. Clark announces that common bay leaves are rich in thymol. There's a world-wide shortage of thymol, which is used as an antiseptic and fungicide.

Here's the pay-off, folks. On three million "waste acres" in northern California alone there grows enough bay to end the thymol shortage! This say-so comes from Dr. Robert S. Aries, research associate of the Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute.

Vitamin P

Ever hear of Vitamin P? Neither did anybody else, until right recently, because it's a new discovery in medicine. It's so new that scientists are still looking for a reliable source. So far, Vitamin P has been found in buckwheat, grapes, citrus peel and bark on the horse chestnut tree. A substance in Vitamin P is rutin, used to treat injuries from over-exposure to X rays.

Let me head you off from trying to mix up your own medicine from wild herbs. It's dangerous because you might get some unexpected and mighty serious results. For instance, a medicinal cactus called peyote contains an alkaloid poison that induces dementia praecox, which is being loco in a big way, and if you're cooped up as a loco you can't get around to gather herbs.

Supplying the healing trade is one thing, supplying plain food is another. I'm not bothered with gloomy predictions as a rule, but some bureau big-wig warns us that in another 50 years, the United States won't be able to raise enough food.

This got me to thinking sort of serious. The demands on our soil are too heavy, this expert says. It can't keep up. The result of overcropping and overgrazing is soil erosion. Maybe this hombre is just another alarmist. But I know many a once fertile region that has become empty wilderness because the good earth has blown or washed away.

I'm Not a Gloomy Gus

The deep South, yonderly from east Texas, isn't howling wilderness, not yet. But the declining yield on wornout cottonlands is swelling Western migration these days. From Georgia, Alabama and Tennessee the farm families come, like Dust Bowl refugees about 15 years ago from the stricken Dakota wheatlands, from parts of Oklahoma, Kansas and Colorado. A good part of the new Western population, especially in the crop areas, talk with that soft, Southern drawl.

Nope, I'm not a gloomy Gus. Come 50 years from now, I'm pretty sure we'll manage to feed ourselves. One reason for hope is that Uncle Sam is taking important steps to correct soil erosion and decline. One step is spreading the gospel of better farming. Stockmen and growers are catching on how to improve soil with cover crops, intelligent tillage and crop rotation.

The 4-H Club

The leading students of this modern agriculture are many thousands of gals and galluses banded together in the nationwide 4-H Club. They are the food producers of the future. To my notion, the 4-H Club is one of the three greatest youth organizations of world history. I aim to tell you more about it as time goes on. What are the other two? The Boy Scouts and the onetime Civilian Conservation Corps.

The CCC is almost forgotten now, except among the boys who belonged to it. But monuments of their work still stand, in the shape of public projects of many kinds. Bigger yet was the accomplishment of the CCC's in turning the lives of youngsters into new and better channels. Toughs, drifters and idlers, a lot of them were when they joined. Today a good part of them are substantial, important citizens.

The Jeep of the Frontier

Now let's take a look back, a century or so. The Conestoga wagon is a symbol of those pioneer days. How many o' you Ranger Clubbers ever have seen a Conestoga wagon, I wonder. You've heard plenty about 'em, of course, because our tophand writing hombres, such as Jackson Cole, mention 'em right frequent.

The Conestoga wagon was the jeep of frontier days. It was so well-made and

loadworthy that it was the favorite of Western migrants, who spread sail cloth on hickory hoops above the high sides, whereby it became known as the prairie schooner.

But long before the days of '49, the Conestoga wagon was built and used in Pennsylvania. General Braddock hollered for 150 of these sturdy vehicles to use in his march against Fort Duquesne in the French and Indian War. All he could get hold of was 25, until Ben Franklin told him every Dutch farmer in Pennsylvania had one. Franklin was told to go git 'em—which he did.

The Right Side

But maybe the Conestoga wagon's most important contribution to history was that it marked the origin of the purely American custom of travelling on the right side of a road. It was thisaway:

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to the right easy and natural. Up to then, it was the universal custom to pass to the left, which has always been the custom of ships at sea, and which is still the custom for road vehicles in all foreign countries.

Nowadays, a Conestoga wagon in good shape is worth the price of a fine, new automobile. Second in value—and in demand among museums, pioneer societies and in the movies—is the Concord stagecoach, which was suspended on heavy leather straps instead of springs.

Wagonwheels

The days of wagonwheels are past—or are they? Plain old wagonwheels have become prized relics. They're popular gateway decorations for high-falutin' ranch homes. Old horseshoes are also grabbed up, mainly by superstitious folks that think they bring good luck. They bring plenty good luck to anybody who has some to sell.

I'm willing to bet you could stand on a street corner, anywhere from Hollywood to Brownsville, and sell all the old horseshoes and wagonwheels you could pile in front of you. Maybe some of you "no-accounts" among the present young generation can see an opportunity in this, same as the Oregon boy saw in his dad's scrap lumber.

Well, here's where we pull up for another roundup of the good things to come in next issue of TEXAS RANGERS. Sure, I aim to be on hand, as usual. I'd sooner miss a meal than one o' these Frontier Post get-togethers, and hope you all feel the same way about it!

—CAPTAIN STARR.

NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE

WHEN big trouble busted in old Texas, you could usually find a Ranger—or more than one—ridin' through the dust and smoke with six-guns hammering. Those upstanding young hombres were the ace trouble shooters of the Southwest, and anyone who elected to match wits and gun savvy with them was either a very brave man or a fool—and sometimes both, because a fool *can* be a brave man, and the other way around.

Of course, when we start talkin' about Rangers in this column, you know what—or who—we're leadin' up to. That's right—Jim Hatfield. He was a big man in any language,

and he didn't have to wear high-heeled Coffeyvilles to prove it. When you read about him, he isn't fiction. He's fact, and you ride with him, stirrup to stirrup, on some of the most exciting adventures that ever engaged a human.

Comin' up in the next issue of TEXAS RANGERS is another Hatfield saga, titled RED RIVER RULE, and when you've read it you'll say that Jackson Cole sure done wrote himself a story.

Things start to happen right off the reel. A man named Philip Vale has a big tract of rich farming land in northeast Texas, which he calls the Central Red River Settlement. He thinks he is going to sell the area to Hans Korder, who will then sell it off in individual packets to legitimate settlers.

But Vale, negotiating the deal with Korder and his two aides in Vale's office in a Missouri town, only *thought* he was going to sell to Korder, for the tall, pock-marked, sinister fellow had other ideas. Read what happened in that lamplighted office after Korder had assured himself that he wanted the land and that the deeds were all in order.

"Fine!" Korder rubbed his strong hands together. He sucked his breath and his tongue clicked. "I'll pay you now, Vale."

Snapper Ed Grosse began to tremble, could not look at Vale. Over by the door, Yates Thassall—big, surly, half-Indian—never moved a muscle, yet seemed poised to spring. For the first time Vale grew uneasy, perhaps from instinct, or the slight manifestations betrayed by the turtle-necked little Grosse.

"No hurry. Tomorrow will do, Korder. Our lawyers should be present."

"I'll do it now." Korder reached in above the rawhide lacings of his leather shirt as though to get at a wallet or moneybelt, but when his hand reappeared it held a long-barreled Colt revolver. A cruel grin spread over his pitted face.

"You've come to rob me?" asked Vale quietly. But he was helpless. He opened his mouth to

[*Turn page*]

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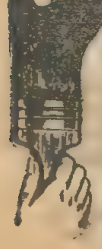

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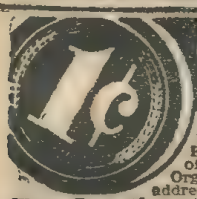

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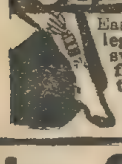

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call for help, but Korder's tigerish lunge brought the revolver barrel down on his skull. Yates Thassall swept in and a knife flashed in the lamplight, sank to the hilt. Grosse slid in behind the dying victim and dealt another mortal blow with a bowie whipped from beneath his fancy shirt.

"That's enough for the old cuss," snapped Korder. "No sense makin' a mess in here. Yates, roll him in that mat and stand by the door. I got some work to do."

Korder sat at the desk, inkwell and quill pens at hand, and other materials. Snapper Ed hovered at his elbow. "How yuh expect to fool the settlers, Korder? Them deeds have Vale's name on 'em."

"That's easy. I'll rub out Vale's name and put in mine. It will be enough to fool them, along with a receipt on Vale's letterhead."

So they doctored the documents to fool the settlers, and they dumped Vale's body in the river. And they went out and sold that land to unsuspecting people who put all they had into it—and then discovered—too late—that they had been gypped. Shelton Craig—he was the leader of the settler group—and his friends had to buy the land all over again from the Vale estate. They paid for it *twice*. And Philip Korder was in the clear.

Korder was in the clear? That's what *he* thought. He had sort of forgotten, mebbe kind of overlooked in a careless moment, the possibility that the Texas Rangers might get on his trail if he got too big for his boots. The Rangers did—in the very efficient person of Jim Hatfield.

But it wasn't the Vale shenanigan that brought the Rangers down on Korder. Korder was like a vulture—one of those revolting birds that often insists on gorging himself to the point where he can't fly away. Korder wasn't satisfied with his land grab. The fool should have known when he was well off, and hightailed out of there, pronto. But, no. He had to stick around, impersonate a Kansas sheriff, and halt trail herds moving north on the Chisholm Trail toward the Kansas border. Here was the report that the Rangers got in Austin, as Captain McDowell stated it to Jim Hatfield:

"I've had several wires, Hatfield. The Chisholm Trail seems to be blocked. Here's one from old Tad Todd, owner of the 2T in south Texas. He claims one of his trail herds has been stopped at the Red River." McDowell glanced at another telegram. "Ray Loman, ramrod of this outfit, got in touch, too. He's up there with the cattle, stalled south of the line.

"A couple other ranchers have complained on the same score. They say Kansas officers have

come south through the Indian Territory to stop our beeves movin' north, some silly story about blackleg. We ain't had anything official on such a quarantine. Loman charges that the section's swarming with rustlers and the outfits have lost cows and horses. Yuh savvy how important that trail is to the State. It's what keeps us goin'."

Yes, sir, when any hombre started messin' around with the Chisholm Trail he had a bobcat by the tail—and that, brothers, ain't good—not for the feller doin' the holding!

What happened? What always happens when Jim Hatfield swings aboard Goldy and takes the field against renegades like Hans Korder? Yes, but don't forget that renegades pack powder and lead, too, and often have mighty nervous trigger fingers. Take it from me, the hinges of hades just glowed plumb redhot down there on the Chisholm Trail when the big Ranger and his sidekicks clashed with the Korder gang of thieves and murderers. It's all in RED RIVER RULE, and it's comin' up in the next issue.

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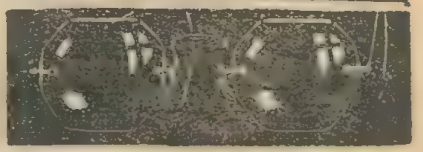

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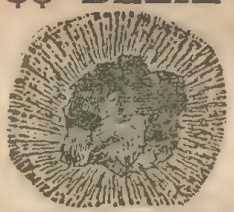

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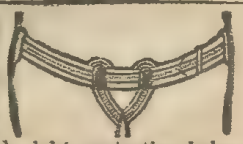

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Readers, you did yourself proud. A regular blizzard of letters and cards from all over the country. So many we can't print 'em all. But we can give you a sort of cross section of the pile, and here it is:

I get every issue of TEXAS RANGERS and I recommend it to everyone who wants good, exciting, humorous stories of the old West. Your stories are getting better all the time. I certainly liked THE STARLIGHT RIDERS. I like Jim Hatfield single and don't want to see him married.—*Jerome Mickelson. Walnut Grove, Minn.*

I haven't been reading TEXAS RANGERS very long, but I can say already that I would not swap one Jim Hatfield novel for all the rest of the western stories in the world. I really thought SMUGGLER TRAIL was tops.—*Eugene Brewer, Spur, Texas.*

We have just finished reading the latest issue of TEXAS RANGERS. Keep up the good work. Jim Hatfield is a favorite with us. We have been reading the magazine for years.—*Mr. and Mrs. Raymond E. Bramhall, Los Angeles, Calif.*

I just started to read your magazine, and I think it is really swell. I read the letters in OUR MAILBAG, and some I agree with and some I don't. I don't think Jim Hatfield should have a girl. If he does, it will spoil the stories. I think Jackson Cole does fine with his stories as they are, and you do fine with your magazine. Keep up the good work.—*Eleanor Hiltbold, Yakima, Wash.*

I think it would be a good idea to have Jim Hatfield captured at the end of a story, and then have it continued in the next issue.—*Don Brock, Mt. Harmon, Mass.*

I think that Jim Hatfield is okay the way he is, but he ought to be called upon more often to use his stamina—as when he lifted the wagon wheels out of the mud in THE STARLIGHT RIDERS. Keep Doc Swap and Long Sam in as

regular features, and ease up on Joe Fry's hatred for Sam.—*Robert Dunn, Kansas City, Mo.*

I have been reading TEXAS RANGERS for a long time, and prefer it to all others—and I read a great many books. In my estimation, Jim Hatfield is tops. I read each book over the second or third time, especially the Jim Hatfield and Doc Swap stories. I think Doc Swap is second best.—*W. A. Ellsworth, El Monte, California.*

I surely do enjoy reading the Jim Hatfield stories. Maybe some day I will be where I can get the magazines often, and keep up with the stories as they come out. Thanks for the wonderful Hatfield novels.—*Mrs. J. E. Ward, Dundee, Miss.*

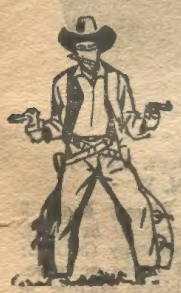
I like your stories, and I like the pictures in your books. But I wish there were more of the pictures, because they help so much to make one see the action of the story. Can do?—*Ronald Milchester, Terre Haute, Indiana.*

SMUGGLER TRAIL was one of the best of the Hatfield stories, says I. And maybe I should know, because I have been reading TEXAS RANGERS for a very long time. It's a fine magazine and I congratulate you on it.—*N. James Kengrow, Chicago, Ill.*

Trust Jim Hatfield to come out of every fracas with flying colors. But trust Jackson Cole to put him into some very interesting tights, too, so that he has to use all of his fine wits and speed and strength to get out. That's the kind of yarn I like to read.—*Thomas Robbins, San Antonio, Texas.*

Well, that's about it for this time, folks. But there'll be more another time, and we hope we'll hear from you soon. Kindly address all letters and post cards to The Editor, TEXAS RANGERS, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. And don't put it off. *Manana* is a nice, soft-sounding Spanish word, but it doesn't get things done that ought to be done today—such as writing letters. Thanks for listenin'—and all the best, till next time.

—THE EDITOR.



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